

# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

May / June 2012 • cjr.org

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How Arianna Huffington and her HuffPost cofounders  
rewrote the laws of online attraction

MICHAEL SHAPIRO

PLUS

### **FREE EXPRESSION AROUND THE WORLD**

**RUSSIA** Paul Starobin

**CHINA** Sambuddha Mitra Mustafi

**SYRIA** Matthieu Aikins

**YEMEN** Walid Al-Saqaf

**UNITED STATES** Dan Gillmor

AND

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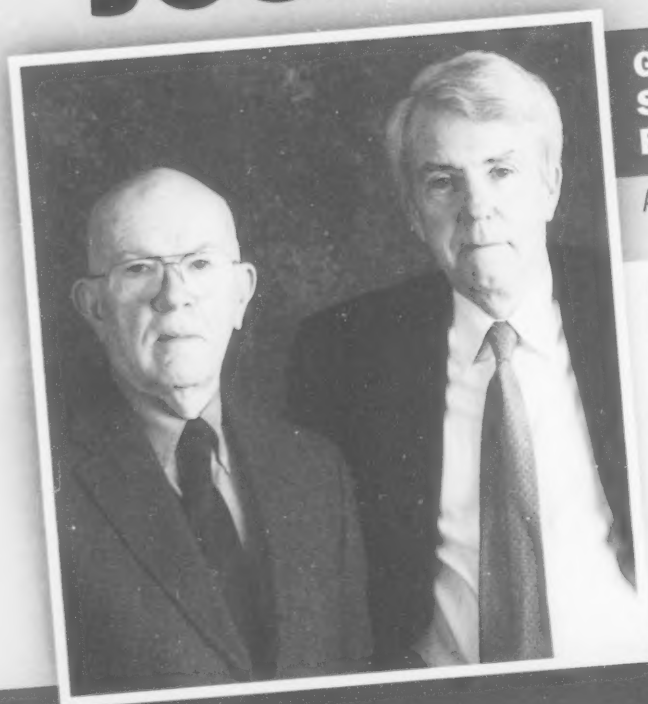


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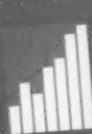
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# COLUMBIA JOURNALISM REVIEW

May/June 2012

"To assess the performance of journalism... to help stimulate continuing improvement in the profession, and to speak out for what is right, fair, and decent."

—from the founding editorial, 1961



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# Opening Shot



**E**very presidential campaign produces its share of iconic images, but never before have we been able to see trail life in so many shades, vintages, and fetishistic detail. For that, thank Instagram, the free photography app—just snatched up by Facebook for \$1 billion. It empowers anyone with a smartphone to snap Polaroid-size photos and make them pretty, instantly, with a range of filters, effects, and customized borders. Also thank the growing tribe of journalists who have been using the app to share images of what AP lensman Evan Vucci calls “the edges of the campaign,” from the quirky (above) to the banal (diner food). The resulting photographic record is vibrant, retro, evocative, and exhaustive. Some photojournalists have challenged the ethics of app-enabled photography, but most Instagrammers use it for fun. “It’s a celebration of photography,” Vucci says. **CJR**

EVAN VUCCI

**Uncle Sam wants Newt**  
Evan Vucci photographed “Uncle Sam,” a.k.a. William House, on March 6 in Huntsville, AL, waiting for a Gingrich rally to begin.



## Aggregated assault

*Whose work is it, anyway? A plea for standards.*

"There's nothing new under the sun." Thus spake my high-school teacher, then nearing retirement, and if I remembered nothing else (besides his rampaging eyebrows and alarming amounts of nostril hair), I would not forget this. His point, at the time somewhat dispiriting, was that ideas are continually repackaged and re-presented. All these years later, surveying the (sometimes acid) reflux culture of online media, his point seems all too well

taken. I daresay many are grateful for the Twitter feeds, blogs, and newsletters that pull together links to what we need to know about—and we also appreciate smart commentary about them. But sometimes a writer (or website) goes too far, hiving off huge chunks of someone else's work and presenting them with minimal added insight, most egregiously without a nod to the original source. During a skirmish last year with Arianna Huffington, *The New York Times's* Bill Keller complained, "In Somalia, this would be called piracy. In the mediasphere, it is a respected business model."

Simon Dumenco, a.k.a. the Media Guy of *Advertising Age*, found out what it was like to be "over-aggregated" last summer, when HuffPost reblogged his column about the Twitter tizzy over Anthony Weiner, recapitulating so much of it that only the truly obsessed would be moved to click through to the source (final tally: a whopping 57 additional page views). At the SXSW conference in March, Dumenco hosted one panel

standards are not going to be imposed, or top-down," he explains. "They will be iterative and open for discussion." Inspired by the online ad-edit guidelines from the American Society of Magazine Editors, the council aims for a simple, common-sense approach to what seems fair when citing the works of others. Three examples from Dumenco: "Credit original sources prominently, not just in a link at the end"; "name-check the writer if you're riffing on his or her ideas"; and don't quote 450 words of a 500-word post, "slap on 50 words, and call it a day."

One benefit of Carr's piece was that new volunteers have stepped forward to help, including the content-sharing site StumbleUpon, and, yes, The Huffington Post. Along with its Pulitzer Prize, it seems, the site is getting religion.

Oh, and "nothing new under the sun"? Turns out it comes from one of the oldest aggregated works still in circulation: the Bible, Ecclesiastes 1:9.

—Cyndi Stivers

on the topic ("Is Aggregation Theft?"), announcing the creation of the Council on Ethical Blogging and Aggregation, a nonprofit that will draft voluntary best-practice guidelines. Among the print and online editors, bloggers, and academics who've agreed to help: Adam Moss of *New York*, David Granger of *Esquire*, Elizabeth Spiers of *The New York Observer*, James Bennet of *The Atlantic*, Sheryl Huggins Salomon of *The Root*, Mark Armstrong of Longreads.com, Evan Hansen of *Wired.com*, former *New York Times* ombudsman Dan Okrent, and yours truly.

Another SXSW session was convened by Maria Popova, who tweets perspicaciously as @brainpicker, proposing the addition of "Curator's Code" symbols to text that would take readers, via a book-marklet, back to the original source. Whether or not those doing the aggregating would actually devote the seconds necessary to adding that snippet of code, the intention is noble. Among Popova's panelists was *New York Times* media gadfly David Carr, who nonetheless sounded dubious about any attempt to propose standards.

As Carr wrote in March, "You can almost hear the digerati seizing with laughter at the idea that a pew full of journalism church ladies is somehow going to do battle with the entire Internet." But Dumenco is inviting the entire Internet to help. The council's work will kick off with a public discussion at Internet Week in May, and then work toward a first draft by fall. "The



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## JOAN SHORENSTEIN CENTER on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

### Announces the Winner of the 2012 GOLDSMITH PRIZE FOR INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING

#### Matt Apuzzo, Adam Goldman, Eileen Sullivan and Chris Hawley

Associated Press

"NYPD Intelligence Division"

The New York Police Department, in close collaboration with the CIA and with nearly no outside oversight, developed clandestine spying programs that monitored and catalogued daily life in Muslim communities, from where people ate and shopped to where they worked and prayed. AP's reporting led three dozen lawmakers in Washington to call for House Judiciary Committee and Justice Department investigations.

#### FINALISTS

##### Brian Ross, Anna Schechter and the ABC News Investigative Team

ABC News 20/20

"Peace Corps: A Trust Betrayed"

An investigation into the murder of volunteer Kate Puzey in Africa uncovered a systematic failure to protect Peace Corps volunteers who were victims of sexual abuse or whistleblowers who tried to report it. The report led to a new law designed to protect Peace Corps volunteers, and requires hiring victims' advocates and improved training.

##### Jim Morris, Ronnie Greene, Chris Hamby and Keith Epstein, Center for Public Integrity, and Elizabeth Shogren, Howard Berkes, Sandra Bartlett and Susanne Reber, National Public Radio

"Poisoned Places: Toxic Air, Neglected Communities"

Regulatory failures and political forces that cause millions of Americans to continue breathing unsafe air were exposed and, for the first time, the EPA's internal "watch list" of the nation's most troublesome air polluters was revealed. This report triggered immediate enforcement action in two states, a push for openness by the EPA and coverage across the U.S.

##### Mark Greenblatt, David Raziq and Keith Tomshe KHOU-TV (CBS Houston)

"A Matter of Risk: Radiation, Drinking Water, and Deception"

The I-team discovered public drinking water so contaminated with radiation that the underground plumbing it traveled through was turned away by scrap yards as "too hot" to recycle. Radiation lab test results for every community in Texas were wrongfully lowered, leaving consumers in the dark about health risks. After this report, many of the most radioactive water wells were taken offline.

##### Danny Hakim and Russell Buettner

The New York Times

"Abused and Used"

Over the past decade, more than 1,200 developmentally disabled people in the care of New York State died for reasons other than natural causes, and state workers who beat or sexually abused them were allowed to keep their jobs. This report led Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo to force out the two top state officials in charge of care for the developmentally disabled, and the state moved to fire 130 employees.

##### Dafna Linzer and Jennifer LaFleur

ProPublica (co-published with The Washington Post)

"Presidential Pardons"

An analysis of presidential pardon recommendations made by the Justice Department shows that whites were nearly four times as likely as minorities to succeed; applicants with the support of a member of Congress were three times as likely to receive a pardon. These findings prompted the Justice Department to launch a review of the system.

##### Special Citation:

Bradley Keoun, Phil Kuntz, Bob Ivry, Craig Torres, Scott  
Lanman and Christopher Condon

Bloomberg News

"The Fed's Trillion-Dollar Secret"

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##### Alan Rusbridger

Editor, *The Guardian*

#### GOLDSMITH BOOK PRIZE WINNERS

Academic: Jeffrey E. Cohen, *Going Local: Presidential Leadership in the Post-Broadcast Age*

Trade: Evgeny Morozov, *The Net Delusion: The Dark Side of Internet Freedom*

## LETTERS

Send letters  
letters@cjr.org

### Patch work

Excellent piece ("The constant gardener" by Sean Roach, CJR, March/April), and even though I didn't join Patch until 2010, my experience matched Roach's in a number of ways. Before joining Patch, I had a lot of experience running larger digital news operations and my own website, which is probably why I was so frustrated by the amount of "guidance" from Patch HQ and my regional editor.

I loved the work and the people I covered. But I was frustrated when my desire to report deeper pieces conflicted with that "5 posts a day" mandate. And there were management issues I won't get into in public.

So my old town is now on its third local editor in 18 months, and it saddens me to see the site posting stories that are sometimes literally a headline with a link to the story that was published by a local newspaper. It's one thing to be beaten by a competitor, but at least make an effort to write a version of the news. Such recycled posts make the site almost useless in my mind. Patch needs to be more than the local stenographer. Entirely too many of their sites have slid into that role.

*Rick Ellis*

*Founder, Managing editor  
AllYourTV.com  
Apple Valley, MN*

So let me see if I have this right: Each Patch editor was doing the work of two editors and a staff of reporters, but I think it's safe to guess that each one was only paid the salary of one editor; and relief came in the form of \$2,000 a month to pay freelancers? And that \$2,000, spread over a sufficient number of freelancers to make enough of a dent in the workload to allow an editor to sleep in on Sunday, meant that freelancers were getting paid what?

The whole undertaking seems predicated on everybody being hugely



Once Patch met its targets, 'magic unicorns bearing panniers filled with ad dollars would descend from the sky...'

overworked and underpaid. Except, presumably, the brains at the top, who came up with this business model. I know from experience that editing even a small weekly local paper can scarcely be done in a 40-hour week; but a small locally owned local paper doesn't have the expectation of such astronomical profits, and doesn't build a business plan on fantasy fiction. The expectation that magic unicorns bearing panniers filled with ad dollars would descend from the sky once all this superhuman labor got the site to its page-view goals seems to have kept management in a chronic state of the fidgets; hence the

constant tweaking of the content strategy and production processes.

The move to aggregation of regional content was not so much a relief to overworked editors as it was a first step toward dispensing with the need for them altogether, even at the cost of being local and unique that originally defined the whole undertaking. The expectations were not adjusted; adjustments were inevitably in the direction of somehow wringing even more out of the staff, including leaving it to them to figure out how to get people to write for them for nothing.

*Kia Penso*

*Takoma Park, MD*

### Talk is cheap

Sorry, but whether journalists should take speaking fees seems like Ethics 101 ("Money talks" by Paul Starobin, CJR, March/April). Speaking for fees to industry groups you cover is unethical. Gretchen Morgenson has got it right: She'll accept paid speaking gigs at universities, but if she speaks to vetted industry groups, she does it for free. End of story. I thought we already went through this back in the 1990s when the *Chicago Tribune's* Jim Warren smoked out and shamed prominent journalists doing paid speaking gigs. How soon we forget. Kudos to Robert Thomson of *The Wall Street Journal* and to CNBC for flatly barring their reporters from doing paid speeches.

*Harris Meyer  
Yakima, WA*

### Hard numbers

**16,502** Number of readers who always check out The Lower Case when CJR arrives.

**16,502** Number of readers who discovered The Lower Case missing from usual place and thought (or shouted) WTF?

**16,502** Number of readers who considered canceling their subscription

unless CJR editors offer a reasonable and timely explanation for deleting the Lower Case page.

**123** Number of readers satisfied with paltry number of Lower Case items in new location.

**4** Number of readers pleased that the Lower Case page deleted (all Republicans).

*Burt Dragin*

*Professor of Journalism*

*Laney College*

*Oakland, CA*

*The editors respond:* A trawl through the CJR archive reveals that at times the Lower Case has run at a half-page—and we often strain to fill a full page. Thus, we decided to try peppering the items, Burma Shave-style, throughout the March/April feature well. In this issue, the items are reunited (page 13). If you'd like to see more space devoted to Lower Case, please help with submissions! Send bonehead heds to [cjr@columbia.edu](mailto:cjr@columbia.edu) or to CJR, 201 Journalism Building, 2950 Broadway, New York, NY 10027.

### Brought to book

In "The Girl Who Loved Journalists" (CJR, January/February), Eric Alterman, bemoaning the loss of book-review sections in US newspapers, neglected to mention the new eight-page book-review section in the Saturday edition of *The Wall Street Journal*, which started publication in the fall of 2010.

As one of the leading critics of Rupert Murdoch's purchase in 2007 of Dow Jones and the *WSJ*, I must give great credit to Robert Thomson, editor-in-chief of Dow Jones, for his decision, unique in today's shrinking newspaper world, to heavily invest in eight pages every Saturday of some of the best-written book reviews published anywhere in the US today.

Friends in the New York City book-publishing industry tell me the *WSJ*'s new book-review section is highly respected and very helpful for launching new books because it is read all over the country.

Competition with *The New York Times* may have inspired the new *WSJ* book-review section, but it is a major, positive contribution to US book publishing and intellectual life. It should

be celebrated by a CJR Laurel and not ignored.

*Jim Ottaway Jr.*

*Retired director and senior VP of Dow Jones*

*Past member of CJR's Board of Overseers*

*New York, NY*

### Correction

In "Only connect" by Alec MacGillis about reporter Connie Schultz (CJR, March/April), we wrote in a caption

for a photo of Michael Green that "Schultz's articles helped set him free" from prison. However, Schultz's series did not lead to Green's exoneration. She chronicled his ordeal, but only after the Innocence Project and his stepfather worked to free him. The week after Schultz's series ran, the real rapist confessed to the crime, 14 years after Green was convicted. The rapist served five years in prison. **CJR**

## NOTES FROM OUR ONLINE READERS

IN A MARCH PIECE, RON HOWELL WROTE ABOUT THE INCREASE IN STORIES about dogs in *The New York Times* since Jill Abramson, author of *The Puppy Diaries*, became executive editor. Here are some of the comments:

I think you'll find that it's not just the NYT that's become obsessed with dog stories. Media all over the country have recently decided to find as many animal-related stories as they can because, in the case of animal-abuse stories, they're guaranteed to elicit immediate, and strong, reactions, and in the case of other kinds of animal stories, strangely enough, they're perceived as human-interest stories with a built-in audience. It's purely a matter of journalistic pandering. —*Martskers*

Is this a joke? This silly piece makes a half-hearted effort to build an argument around what seems to be a random and rather meaningless statistic. —*Thunk*

Regarding the comment by Thunk, they're neither random nor meaningless, those dog stories. They're coming one right after the other, and taken together, they say a lot about our evolving (devolving) culture and about the state of journalism.

—*Ron Howell*

I did a root search for the letter "s" in the LexisNexis database, and the results were astounding. There's definitely something going on. In the last four months alone since Abramson took over as editor, no other letter was used more in sentence composition and structure in the NYT. —*Wexis*

## EDITOR IN CHIEF'S NOTE

PERHAPS THE BEST THING ABOUT TURNING 50 IS THAT PEOPLE TEND TO toss you more than one party. Christie Hefner, chair of CJR's half-century celebration, has been pulling out all the stops. The latest, on April 11, was hosted by Thomson Reuters in its Times Square aerie (we actually looked down on the ball that drops each New Year's). Reuters's Chrystia Freeland ably moderated as her colleague Caroline Drees, GlobalPost editor Thomas Mucha, NBC's Mara Schiavocampo, and Columbia's own Howard French compared notes on the challenges of covering the globe in an era of shrinking budgets and short, parochial attention spans. Check out what you missed at [cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/freelancers\\_on\\_the\\_front\\_lines.php](http://cjr.org/behind_the_news/freelancers_on_the_front_lines.php).

On May 7 (which just happens to be the 100th birthday of Columbia Journalism School), CJR heads to the Newseum in Washington for a conversation about issues raised on pages 17–30: NPR's Robert Siegel will moderate "Truth and Consequences: Free Expression and Independent Journalism in a Digital World." Our esteemed panelists: Columbia President Lee Bollinger; Voice of America director David Ensor; Rebecca MacKinnon, senior fellow at the New America Foundation and author of *Consent of the Networked*; and CJR's new BFF, Chrystia Freeland. If you miss the broadcast, please check it out in the C-SPAN archive. —*Cyndi Stivers*



# Currents



## Open Bar The Press Room

15 East Ortega Street, Santa Barbara, CA

**Year opened** 1995

**Owner** James "Raff" Rafferty (born in Manchester, England)

**Distinguishing features** Next door to the *Santa Barbara News-Press*. Live soccer—excuse us, *football*—from England and Europe in the mornings. An exhibition on the first Thursday of every month by local artists, whose work, all of which is for sale, adorns the walls.

**Who drinks here** Soccer fans, sports writers, and locals trying to avoid the tourists and college students.

**Signature drink** The English Channel: 1 oz Hendrick's gin; 1/2 oz St. Germain; 1/2 oz Pimm's; splash of Sprite; splash of Sweet & Sour; fresh lemon juice. Serve in a martini glass.

**Off the record** Framed front pages of the *News-Press* marking historic local events, such as the 1925 earthquake, used to hang on the walls. But the pages are gone, as are numerous *News-Press* reporters who used to hang out at the bar before they were fired or driven away by Wendy McCaw, the paper's content-meddling, union-busting owner. McCaw bought the paper in 2000, and over the next several years her clashes with the newsroom produced lawsuits, a child-pornography investigation, an SPJ "Ethics in Journalism" award for newsroom staffers who stood up to her, and a documentary called *Citizen McCaw*.

**On the record** John Zant, a long-time sports columnist at the *News-Press* before he fled to the *Santa Barbara Independent* in 2007, attributes the area media's "exceptional" coverage of soccer—often a second-class citizen in American sports pages—to the bar's enthusiastic embrace of the game.

**Nicknames** The unofficial British consulate.

Send recommendations for this feature to [openbar@cjr.org](mailto:openbar@cjr.org).

Sree Tips

## Social-media etiquette for journalists

**Q:**

I just came back from a conference; what's the best way to use LinkedIn to connect with people I met there?

**A:**

First, make sure you have a profile photo. Next, try to get to 100-percent "completeness" by filling out all the sections LinkedIn asks you to. (It just became easier to get to have a complete profile, since LinkedIn recently de-emphasized the importance of recommendations.) Look up the people you met IRL ("in real life," as the kids say it) and send them an invitation—but never use the default greeting ("I'd like to add you to my professional network"). Nothing screams "I'm lazy" louder than not bothering to write a personalized line or two. And don't forget to see if the conference has a special LinkedIn group where attendees can continue to network; many do.

@ColumbiaJourn professor Sree Sreenivasan (@Sree) answers your social-media-etiquette questions. Send your queries via #asksree on Twitter or e-mail sree@sree.net (subject line = CJR etiquette).

## Language Corner Basis Points

"On a case-by-case basis." "On a regular basis." "On an urgent basis."

Each of those base expressions, from *The Associated Press Stylebook*, no less, can be said differently, more fluidly: "Case by case." "Regularly." "Daily."

There's nothing grammatically wrong with those "on a (whatever) basis" phrases, except that they're wordy. Or, as Bryan A. Garner puts it in his *Modern American Usage*, "The word *basis* often signals verbosity in adverbial constructions." (Let's hope his verbosity was ironic.)

In one week's worth of

Nexis citations from US publications and blogs, "on a case-by-case basis" appeared more than 100 times. "On a daily basis" appeared a whopping 600 times, give or take a few. If they had all been whittled down, more than 3,000 words could have been saved, or used to write several more articles.

Other uses of "basis" can be off base, or on target: "On a legal basis" could be just "legally," but it would be fine to say, "That is the legal basis for my argument." A "basis point" in financial contexts is a lot shorter than saying "one-thousandth of a point." But watch out for "on a part-time basis," "on a yearly basis," and other such "on a basis'es, er, bases.

Now you're on a first-name basis with basis.

—Merrill Perlman

## Hard Numbers

**888,000**

downloads of "Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory," the January 6 *This American Life* episode based on Mike Daisey's one-man play that chronicled his travels to the Foxconn factory in China where Apple products are manufactured

**750,000**

typical number of downloads for a TAL episode

**73,000**

Google searches for "Mike Daisey" in the week following the original TAL broadcast

**-.16**

percent change in Apple's stock price over the weekend following the Friday, January 6, broadcast of "Mr. Daisey and the Apple Factory"

**256,425**

(and counting) signatures on a Change.org petition calling for Apple to improve conditions in its China factories, following the original TAL broadcast

**891,000**

downloads of "Retraction," the hour-long TAL mea culpa that explained how numerous inaccuracies were uncovered in the Daisey story after the fact

**9**

number of times the word "lie" or "lied" was used in TAL's retraction episode

**127,000**

Google searches for "Mike Daisey" in the week following TAL's retraction

**+2.65**

percent change in Apple's stock price over the weekend following the Friday, March 16, broadcast of "Retraction"

**3,000,000**

number of the new iPad 3s sold in the four days following its release on March 16

**486**

(and counting) signatures on a petition to withdraw the Change.org petition following the "Retraction" episode

Sources: Apple, Google, Google Finance, Change.org, *This American Life*, NiemanLab.org



## Darts & Laurels

### Much ado...

On March 21, *The Orange County Register* published a blog post, based on the sworn affidavit of a process server, alleging that Julio Perez, a California state Assembly candidate, did not live where he said, or within the district he was running to represent.

Reporter Brian Joseph packed his story with details and links to testimony. But the *Register* didn't have a reporter make the 2.4-mile trip to the home in question (Joseph is based in Sacramento, so couldn't have done it himself). Had editors bothered, they would have found—as a reporter for the nonprofit Voice of OC did—plenty of evidence that it was indeed Perez's place: bills, neighbors, the candidate himself.

It took the *Register* two days to “update” its story, which it did in petulant fashion by (finally) dispatching a reporter to the residence to grill the candidate about which brand of toothpaste was in the bathroom and what drinks were in the fridge. Perez nailed it: Col-

gate and Cherry Coke Zero. (Joseph insists the story isn't over, but even if that's true, his paper blew round one.)

### Google it, man!

For the record, 14-year-old V.A. Shiva Ayyadurai did *not* invent e-mail. Seems obvious, but it took *The Washington Post* a mind-boggling half a month to untangle the truth behind a February 17 story by *Post* Innovations editor Emi Kolawole headlined: INVENTOR OF E-MAIL HONORED BY SMITHSONIAN.

Not exactly. Ayyadurai copyrighted an electronic-messaging system called “EMAIL,” but he did so years after real “e-mail” was invented; and Ayyadurai was “honored by the Smithsonian” only in that the institution

accepted his donation of EMAIL-related artifacts.

Compounding the gaffe was the glibness of *Post* ombudsman Patrick Pexton's initial response to reader complaints. He found more fault with the outraged commenters than with the flawed reporting, which he defended as the heroic effort of an overworked journalist: “Could you, as Ms. Kolawole did, do all this in one day?” he wrote. “Write a story, edit seven videos, and write up a transcript of her Q&A session with Ayyadurai?”

A week later, Pexton published a more level-headed response, in which he admitted that his original post was “dismissive, snarky and wrongheaded.” Maybe he was overworked, too.



## Title Search User Experience (UX) Designer

**Susan Rits** is a User Experience (UX) Designer who worked at Time Warner, Fox, and Google. She is founder and CEO of Zazum, based in San Francisco. **Jay Woodruff** interviewed her in March.

**Give us your Tweetable definition of a UX Designer.** UX designers live to wipe out tech rage—we make using software a pleasure.

**How'd you get into this racket?** I moved to NYC out of grad

school planning to be a playwright. But I got to Brooklyn about the same time as the Web did, and it sucked me in. I loved the combination of art and technology, and being one of the first in the city to know anything about designing and building websites. I had a lot of work from ABC, CNNfn, Time Warner—I designed the first NY1 website ever—and Fox, and tons of other places.

It was while I was redesigning the CNNfn website (a.k.a. Money.com) and doing user studies that I began to understand what user experience was all about: helping people use the website without getting frustrated or lost. Not blaming the users when the interface is so bad they can't make it work. Then I read a book called *Don't Make Me Think* by Steve Krug, and everything gelled for me.

**What do you tell civilians you do for a living?** Commercial artist. Most people blanch

when I say User Experience or UX.

### Caged death match, UX vs. UI (user interface), who prevails and why?

Always UX. Think architect vs. interior decorator. The right color paint isn't going to hold the wall up. Always go with the UX person. They're UI on steroids—they think through the process instead of just how to make the buttons look good. And they can usually make the buttons look good, too.

### What's the weirdest real digital job title you can think of?

Technology Evangelist—what you have to have if you don't have a good UX designer.

### What advice do you have for a 22-year-old contemplating a future in UX design?

Study the masters: Krug, Alan Cooper, and, of course, Steve Jobs. In fact, just study Apple and you'll understand why UX is so very, very important.



## What's in My...Backpack Dean Takahashi, GamesBeat

It's fitting that veteran tech journalist Dean Takahashi, who grew up a self-described "arcade rat," weaned on classics like Pong and Galaga, has become one of the country's most prominent writers about the video game industry. He opened his "nice, big REI bag" for **Tyler Orsburn** to prove a bit of hard-earned journalistic wisdom: "You gotta have backups."



"After more than 20 years in this business, you learn to prepare for the worst," Takahashi says. For him, that means carrying multiples: He uses two laptops ①, a Toshiba and a MacBook Air. "In February, I was juggling two at a time," he says, "and one fell off my lap and the screen broke." He always has two phones, an Android and an iPhone. "One's Verizon, the other is ATT," he explains, "so I'm never without cellphone coverage." ② There are two sets of headphones ③; extra batteries ④; and a bunch of chargers ⑤, including one that plugs into a car's cigarette lighter.

Takahashi is a self-contained multimedia reporter. He shoots his own photos, so there's a digital camera ⑥ (plus extra lens, of course, and tripod) ⑦, and his own video ⑧; and while he does carry a notebook ⑨ ("for backup"), he relies on a digital recorder for his "notes." ⑩.

Sometimes, though, the system failure is human. He carries a supply of Bheestie bags ⑪, which remove water from personal electronic devices. "If you drop your iPhone in the toilet, you have a chance to save it with these little bags. I used one after I left a modem outside in the rain."

He is so prepared, those around him can afford to not be. His MiFi mobile hotspot ⑫ provides Internet access for up to five laptops at once. "Covering conferences, there are so many journalists on the WiFi that it invariably goes down. Usually, I just let members of my team connect, but if someone's really desperate, I'll do them a favor."

No game-writer's backpack would be complete without...games. He carries a PlayStation ⑬ and a copy of *Unit 13* ⑭, an action game that lets him match wits against global terrorists.

His Boy Scout tendencies ex-

tend beyond the tech tools of his trade: a bunch of business cards ⑮; a flashlight ⑯. "I have to drive so often—like 55 miles one way from my house to San Francisco—that if my car breaks down it's good to have a flashlight." Also, a bag of change ⑰. "When I get to San Francisco, I have to park at a bunch of meters."

And if all these precautions fail, he has 2 bottles of Motrin ⑱.

The most unexpected item? A Strive step-counter ⑲. "So far today, 2,936. I hit my peak at 17,000—something like seven miles—during the Consumer Electronics Show."





**Family man** Bull rider Keith Roquemore with his wife, an amateur barrel racer, and kids

## How I Got That Story ... RealRural

In March 2011, **Lisa Hamilton**, a writer and photographer, began a series of road trips around rural California. She had a grant from the Creative Work Fund—a San Francisco-based foundation that supports collaboration between artists and nonprofits—to tell stories that would help bridge the cultural divide between the rural and urban parts of the state. Initially she wanted to address issues relating to the health of rural communities in the state. But as Hamilton started logging miles (nearly 10,000 total by the time she finished in December) and searching for the stories that

would illuminate those issues in different ways, she began to understand that she needed to back up and tell a much more fundamental story.

**LH:** When I would tell friends and colleagues that I was doing a project about rural California, they'd say, 'Oh, the Central Valley,' meaning the stretch of high-production farmland along the interstate between San Francisco and LA. It's just

one of dozens of regions within the state's non-urban areas, but that's all they knew of rural California. And within that landscape they were thinking of just two kinds of people: the big agribusiness titan and the anonymous farm worker. I realized I had to go back a step and simply introduce people to rural California. Before I could start talking about peoples' complicated relationships to, say, water, I had to



first establish that there are all kinds of different people in the state who have all kinds of different relationships to water. And I needed to do it using the language of stories, not the language of issues.

*Hamilton brought her infant daughter, Ada, with her on the reporting trips. Having Ada along changed the way Hamilton worked, and helped her capture the nuance and subtlety in the stories she found.*

**LH:** I remember reading an obit for John Updike in which someone described him as a traveler and a witness. I thought about the difference in those two states of observing. The traveler is the one who eats up the world and wants to get her hands on everything and go as far as possible; the witness is the one who sits there and watches the same thing for hours, and tries to understand it deeply and intimately. As a photographer, I had always been strictly a traveler—I would get in the car in the morning and drive until I couldn't feel my legs, then stop at the closest hotel, sleep for eight hours, and get up and do it again.

Having a baby with me meant I couldn't do that. Instead, I had to schedule interviews in advance, which often meant arriving to find that the person in front of me was not some amazing visual spectacle, but rather a boring-looking person in a boring-looking place. So I was challenged to be a witness; I had to sit with that person and try to understand him or her, and get the person to trust me and let me in enough to photograph in a way that tells more of a story than that initial boring appearance can tell. It changed the way I photograph. Before, I didn't photograph people often. When you're

wandering, you don't have time to sit down and listen for hours before you make a photograph. But by taking the time to be a witness, the portrait becomes a much richer story.

*This is evident in the photograph (at left) of Keith Roquemore, a professional bull rider, his wife Leah, and their two daughters.*

**LH:** My early photos of Keith were just photos of a guy who's a bull rider. It wasn't until I understood that the crux of his experience, the challenge he was trying to figure out, was how could he be a great rodeo bull rider and a good father and husband. Those two things are almost contradictory by nature. For me, in this photo you see that complex story. I can see in his face a lot of conflict about who he is.

It was at this dinky little county fair rodeo, and he had just tried to ride a bull and got thrown off. Now, he's not just some average bull rider. He made it to the PBR [Professional Bull Riding] finals in 2005; he's really good, and has a shot at being very successful. But here he is, just having been thrown at this crappy little country fair, beaten, actually, by the boy who won the high school rodeo championship the year before. So, you know, he's got this 19-year-old on his tail. At the same time, he's trying to watch after his daughters. His wife, Leah, also competed in the rodeo—she's an amateur barrel racer—but you can see in her face that it's a lot less complicated for her. She wants to smile for the camera, whereas Keith is sort of working it out every minute of every day. It took a lot of time spent *not* photographing, just listening to him, to get there.

*Hamilton's project is at [www.realtural.org](http://www.realtural.org).*

## The Lower Case

### Mother arrested after drowning

*Houston Chronicle, 10/18/11*

### 173 animals seized; 2 face cruelty charges

*Bellingham (WA) World, 9/23/11*

### La. chimpanzees get pregnant despite vasectomies

*The Associated Press, 2/27/12*

### 'At Last' singer Etta James dies

*Richmond Times-Dispatch, 1/21/12*

### Soccer-Mom madam cools her heels in Riker's, but will her clients get off?

*New York Observer, 3/19/12*

### Shark bites land surfer in hospital

*The Gazette (Cedar Rapids, IA), 10/30/11*

#### AFGHANISTAN

### U.S. pays \$50,000 per killing to massacre families

*San Francisco Chronicle, 3/26/12*

### In Three Rivers, community and family bore a hero

*Caller.com, 3/27/12*

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ON THE JOB

## An unflinching witness

*Long Island native  
Marie Colvin spent her  
career chronicling the horrors  
of war and oppression,  
from Sri Lanka to Syria.  
She wanted the world  
to see what she saw.*

BY JON SWAIN

Marie Colvin, who was killed in Syria on February 22, represents a great deal that is excellent about the type of journalism to which she lost her life. We both were foreign correspondents for *The Sunday Times* of London for many years. Inevitably, that meant covering those wars that were among the biggest stories of our time. Our friendship was that strongest of bonds formed through our common experience of some of the darkest extremes of human behavior.

War reporting is a tough trade which, when Marie started out, was regarded as the glamorous end of journalism. Marie wanted to experience for herself the destructive forces that surface wherever blood and death run rife. She wanted to witness what these things did to people, and she wanted the world to know what she saw.

Hers was an uncompromising, idealistic style of frontline reporting, and she did it well. She had that sense of mission that we all need to make ourselves face the horrific realities of war, so that

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**The hole truth** In 2005, while reporting on the 'tunnel economy' in the Palestinian territories, Marie Colvin prepared to descend into a channel that had been dug in a little girl's bedroom in Gaza.

SEANUS MURPHY / VII

we can recount them to others. Marie was generous and brave, loyal and kind, and I do not believe she had a malicious thought in her head. She had spirit and stamina, and she carved a stellar path for herself. When she started some 25 years ago, conflict reporting was a male-dominated trade. This did not deter her. She was feminine, but she liked being one of the boys, and was a much-loved figure on the road. She laughed and drank a lot.

Marie was also lucky to have editors who encouraged her in her life's work. But the qualities that gave her the determination to follow the riskiest stories, and the support she was given to do so, in the end, killed her. Everyone who practices this type of journalism knows that the balance between life and death is a fine one. Marie knew this better than most. But it seemed to her and to *The Sunday Times* that the risks and rewards were worth it. She believed passionately that her reporting made a difference. And she won many awards, which encouraged her and her editors to run ever-greater risks.

Early on, in Lebanon, she showed the guts that were to mark her career. In 1987, the Palestinian refugee camp at Bourj el Barajneh was under fire from the Syrian-backed Amal militia, which was shooting people as they entered and left the camp. The only way in was to run a gauntlet of fire down the so-called "path of death." Marie and her photographer, Tom Stoddart, negotiated with the Amal commander to let them make the run. But they were unable to let the armed Palestinians inside defending it know that they were coming. Marie and Tom held hands and ran. Amazingly, they made it without being shot at by either side.

Marie spent two days in the camp, during which time she met Pauline Cutting, a British surgeon and a selfless hero in the middle of the slaughter. When she made the reverse run out, Marie carried in her underwear her photographer's film and a letter from Cutting addressed to the Queen, appealing for British help. This was typical of Marie. Years later, in 2003, trying to work her way south through Iraqi Kurdistan to position herself to cover the American invasion of Iraq, she hid in the back of a truck under sacks of potatoes.

Marie knew that her job might entail the sacrifice of her life. In 2001, she lost an eye when the Sri Lankan army shelled her while she was re-entering government territory, after reporting clandestinely from a Tamil Tiger guerrilla zone. I flew to Sri Lanka and accompanied her on the long flight from

tragic. So, too, Ochlik's, and other recent deaths—not least the 13 Syrian activists said to have died in getting the photographer who had been working with Marie out of the city. Their deaths have sparked some reassessment of the risks war reporters take, and ask others to take, in the nebulous name of truth.

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## The refugee camp was under fire from the Amal militia. The only way in was to run a gauntlet of fire down the 'path of death.' Marie and the photographer held hands and ran.

Colombo for hospital treatment in New York, and marveled at her resilience. She was on a stretcher in a lot of pain, exhausted from the ordeal, but she bore the loss of her eye with uncomplaining courage, and she still managed to file a compelling story.

After many years of frontline reporting, the shocks and stresses of the evil that Marie had witnessed inevitably took their toll. She suffered a serious bout of post-traumatic stress disorder after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, and was unable to work for many months. She was unhappy in love, and there were dark times when friends feared she would commit suicide by throwing herself into the river.

Marie pulled through these recurring dark periods, and lately seemed to have found a renewed vigor. She took up sailing again, a passion from her Long Island upbringing (she grew up in Oyster Bay, NY, the daughter of schoolteachers). She lived on the banks of the Thames, and the parties she gave for the annual boat race between Oxford and Cambridge were legendary. Marie promised her friends to take it easier.

But she could not give up frontline reporting, and when the uprisings in the Arab world began to take root in late 2010, she was unstoppable.

Marie was killed in Syria along with Remi Ochlik, a talented 28-year-old French photographer, when Syrian troops shelled Homs. Her loss is

She is the latest in a long line of colleagues of mine over the years who became victims of war, starting with 20 who were captured and killed by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, my own baptism in war reporting, during eight murderous weeks in April and May, 1970.

It is sad that Marie, too, died in this violent way. But not surprising. War always kills, after all. Marie's style of journalism deserves to survive. At its best it helps us to understand better what our action—or our inaction—does in precarious parts of the world. I hope that people of courage like Marie are prepared to carry on facing danger to tell us, firsthand, what they see.

And let us salute them. **CJR**

*JON SWAIN, a British writer and foreign correspondent, was the Paris correspondent for The Sunday Times of London for many years. He was portrayed by Julian Sands in the 1984 film, The Killing Fields, and is the author of River of Time: a memoir of Vietnam, set in Indochina from 1970 to 1975.*

### Your face here

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## Muscovy pluck

*How long can Ekho Moskvyy radio get away with pooh-poohing Putin?*

BY PAUL STAROBIN

IN VLADIMIR PUTIN'S RUSSIA, THERE IS NO MORE PERSISTENT reproach to his autocratic rule than the country's oldest independent radio station, Ekho Moskvyy. A ripe case in point came during the run-up to the March election, in which Putin was vying for his third term as president. Just days before the vote, Channel One, the country's dominant, state-controlled television outlet, aired the sensational tale of a plot to assassinate Putin. The broadcast was met with skepticism along Moscow's political grapevine; given that the suspects had been arrested weeks before, it smelled like a stunt to rally support for Putin.

It was left to Ekho Moskvyy to deliver a public expression of that skepticism, by promptly broadcasting a pungent interview with Dmitri Oreshkin, a political analyst and well-known Putin critic. Team Putin is "trying to mobilize public opinion according to the logic that we are surrounded by enemies and that we have one decisive, effective, and intelligent national leader that they want to destroy," Oreshkin bluntly declared. *The New York Times* included the quote, with credit to the station, in its story on the matter. That's Ekho Moskvyy, a thorn in Putin's side that he has so far been unable, or unwilling, to extract.

PAUL STAROBIN, a former Moscow bureau chief at BusinessWeek, is at work on a documentary film on Russia.

For his part, Putin, who rolled to victory anyway, makes no secret of his disdain for Ekho Moskvyy. "You pour diarrhea over me day and night," he told Alexey Venediktov, the station's longtime editor-in-chief, at a meeting of top Russian editors in January. All of which raises a couple of questions: Putin has been in power for nearly 13 years, and in that time has neutered many a critic. Why has Ekho Moskvyy survived? And as Putin begins a new term as president facing unprecedented discontent among the public, is the station's luck about to run out?

EKHO MOSKVYY OPERATES OUT OF THE 14TH FLOOR OF A concrete slab of a building on the Novy Arbat, a glitzy commercial thoroughfare in central Moscow. The station's format is dominated by live, talk-show-style interviews punctuated with breaking-news updates and frequent—and sometimes cheesy—advertisements.

When the station was founded in August 1990, in the waning days of the Soviet Union, the audience was mostly listeners at home in their apartments. No longer. Car ownership has soared over the last 20 years, and Ekho Moskvyy, 91.2 on the FM dial, now derives the bulk of its audience from the horn-honking drivers on Moscow's traffic-choked streets. At peak drive times—weekday mornings and early





**You again?** Although Vladimir Putin considers Ekho editor Alexey Venediktov an enemy, he is said to have grudging respect for him.

evenings—the metropolitan Moscow listenership is about one million.

Although Ekho Moskvyy takes pains to characterize itself as a professional news organization, not “opposition” radio, it is known for giving voice to the very figures that the Kremlin would prefer remain quiet. On the evening of Election Day, for instance, with Putin’s victory assured, host Sergey Buntman chatted with the controversial blogger Alexey Navalny, a leader of the anti-Putin street rallies who has branded Putin the head of a party of “crooks and thieves.” Navalny, tacitly banned from appearing on Russian television, told Buntman that Putin’s victory was illegitimate. “I am sure that the Putin regime will collapse,” he predicted.

The 56-year-old Buntman, Ekho Moskvyy’s first deputy editor-in-chief, who has been with the station from the start, later told me that he was not a cheerleader for Navalny—or even much of a fan. “In some way, he’s quite dangerous,” Buntman says, because “he’s a nationalist. To be against Putin and to be a new Putin, it’s not the way” to improve Russia. But Ekho Moskvyy’s goal, he says, is “to keep the stage for every political opinion” and “to try to create an objective picture” of the world.

SHEER LUCK IS ONE REASON EKHO MOSKVYY IS STILL ALIVE. The station emerged from the *glasnost*, or openness, policy of Mikhail Gorbachev in the 1980s. The founders wanted to provide an alternative to “official” information, and not surprisingly, Ekho Moskvyy wound up on the hit list of the group of government hardliners, led by KGB officials, that attempted a coup to preserve the Soviet Union. The putsch failed, and

even though Gorbachev was doomed, the first leader of the new Russian Federation, Boris Yeltsin, was committed to an open media. The young station had dodged a bullet.

Still, many of the businesses that were launched in those early years, media startups included, had no idea how to operate in a commercial environment—and as a result, many failed. That suggests another, more durable reason, for Ekho Moskvyy’s longevity: the savvy of its founders, who had a clear idea of their mission but also understood their limitations. They came of age, after all, in an era when entrepreneurial activity could lead to a prison sentence.

Top editor Venediktov, born in 1955 and a school teacher in Soviet times, had the sense to realize, as he later told a Russian interviewer, that “it was time to stop working like amateurs.... A lot was expected of us, but our equipment was obsolete, pay was miserable, and we could not

afford to hire people.” So the journalists sold a controlling stake to a professional investor—the oligarch Vladimir Gusinsky, who had close ties to the Yeltsin regime—with the stipulation, inscribed in the station’s charter, that only they would elect the editor-in-chief, who had final say on editorial content.

When Putin came to power in 2000, determined to crack down on the oligarchs, Gusinsky was an early casualty. He fled the country, signing over his media holdings to a creditor, Gazprom-Media, an arm of the state-controlled energy giant. Once again, it looked like curtains for Ekho Moskvyy. But the staff was able to work out an operating agreement with their new “partner.” Under the arrangement, which still stands, Gazprom-Media has 66 percent of the shares and the journalists own the remaining 34 percent. But it takes a super-majority of 75 percent to change the station’s charter, including the crucial provision that the newsroom picks the editor-in-chief. What’s more, each journalist on staff owns at least one share of the station—collectively held in a company registered in Delaware—making it difficult for Gazprom-Media, or any other investor, to gain a 75 percent stake.

As a further precaution, Venediktov deliberately stays out of the station’s financial affairs. Problems for Russians who find themselves on the wrong side of political power often come in the form of ginned-up tax violations and the like. Buntman told me that Venediktov hasn’t signed a single financial document in his entire professional life.

Of course, Putin could still come up with a pretext for shuttering Ekho Moskvyy. But doing so would likely cause an international outcry. In another illustration of the journalists’ savvy, the station has spun a web of personal ties with leading Western political figures by giving them a media platform when they visit Moscow. US President Bill Clinton, German Chancellor Gerhard Schroeder, and US secretaries of state Colin Powell and Condoleezza Rice all made the pilgrimage to Ekho Moskvyy while in office. More recently,

the new US Ambassador to Russia, Michael McFaul, under fire from Putin's regime for supposedly giving succor to the anti-Putin opposition, went on the station for an interview. Meanwhile, *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the *Financial Times* cover the station's plight as a barometer of press freedom in Russia.

"Ekho has become an icon of Russia's post-Soviet media," says an admiring competitor, Konstantin von Eggert, a host at Moscow's Kommersant-FM radio and a former chief of the BBC Russian Service Moscow bureau. Its shutdown "would provoke a huge backlash" in the West, he says.

There's also a cynical explanation for why Putin tolerates the radio station he hates. Putin understands, the thinking goes, that he is able to keep his grip on power, in part, by giving his harshest critics a safe place to gripe about his regime. The radio station, in this formulation, serves as a convenient pressure-release valve. Furthermore, Ekho Moskvyy is the media outlet to which the regime can point when accused of squelching press freedom in Russia.

In my experience, it often pays to believe the cynical explanation for just about anything happening in Russia. But I don't buy this one. The problem is that Ekho Moskvyy really is not all that safe for the Kremlin—not when it gives voice to vitriolic Putin detractors like Alexey Navalny. Last December, after parliamentary elections in which Putin's United Russia party won a majority on the basis of what appeared to be widespread fraud, tens of thousands of Muscovites took to the streets, egged on by Navalny, to demonstrate for fair elections. Ekho Moskvyy is plainly sympathetic to this movement. For this reason alone, it may be premature to conclude that the station will survive another six years with Putin. Under pressure, the president may consider Ekho Moskvyy a threat that he can no longer abide.

In fact, there has been a consequence to the "diarrhea" incident of January. Gazprom-Media was able to force Venediktov to step down from the station's board of directors, although he remains editor-in-chief. Buntman told me that this move did not originate with Putin but probably from some bureaucrat taking advantage of a moment of vulnerability for Venediktov. Putin and Venediktov have on occasion met to talk over matters, and Putin "has some respect towards Venediktov" as "a hard opponent," Buntman says. A Putin spokesperson did not respond to a request for comment on Ekho Moskvyy; Gazprom-Media has said publicly that it is not seeking Venediktov's removal as editor-in-chief or changes in the station's editorial posture.

Still, Venediktov initially resisted my request for an interview, apparently because of the delicacy of the situation. But after I finished my talk with Buntman, we met and chatted briefly, and as I was about to leave the station he chased me down, proudly waving a piece of paper. It contained an answer I had not been able to extract from Buntman: how much profit, if any, Ekho Moskvyy, actually made. Look here, he said—the station made 25,585 rubles in 2011 (about \$880), after taxes. And not a kopek, Venediktov made a point of stressing, has been borrowed from Gazprom-Media, so there is no leverage on that front. Perhaps he is not, as Buntman told me, involved in the station's financial management, but he surely grasps its import.

All of which suggests still another reason why Ekho Moskvyy lives on: a base of advertisers, willing to ignore, at least for now, Putin's fulminations against the station in exchange for the allure of reaching a million prospective customers in Russia's blossoming consumer society. "The state is always after us," Venediktov said. "I feel absolutely confident we will survive."



## Sino the times

*Can China's billions buy media credibility?*

BY SAMBUDDHA MITRA MUSTAFI

LOCALS CALL IT *DA KUCHA*, OR "BIG BOXER SHORTS," because of its shape. China Central Television's future headquarters in Beijing is 54 stories, twin towers of glass and steel connected by an angular wedge at the top. Overlooking the Central Business District, it stands out in a city whose architecture is a mix of imperial grandeur, gray communist-

era buildings, and dazzling modern construction. *Da kucha* will be a striking symbol of CCTV's expanding budget and global ambition.

And of China's other global media ambitions as well. Among other things, the government is building an English-language world service that will compete with BBC News—but with what is said to be 19 times the annual budget of BBC, currently the world's largest news organization.

Having already achieved the status as the world's second-largest national economy, China has decided that it also needs soft power, the ability to influence world public opinion to promote its commercial and foreign-policy interests. "To some

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degree, whoever owns the commanding heights of cultural development, and soft power, will enjoy a competitive edge internationally," declared a communiqué that came out of the October 2011 plenary of the Communist Party's Central Committee. Toward that end, the Chinese government allocated \$8.7 billion in 2009–2010 alone to "external publicity work."

The beneficiaries of this largesse are mostly the Big Four state-owned media corporations—CCTV, China Radio International (CRI), Xinhua news agency, and *The China Daily* newspaper and website. From inside *da kucha* and other news bureaus across the world, the Communist Party hopes to remake the negative image of China that it perceives in coverage by Western broadcasters. It hopes to replace the images of urban pollution, self-immolating Tibetan monks, and sweatshop workers with those of its rapidly growing cities and a prosperous new consumer class.

The makeover is already well under way. "This is Africa Live from CCTV News," declared Beatrice Marshall, a CCTV anchor in Kenya, as she launched the network's Nairobi broadcast center in January. This was followed in February by the launch of CCTV America, with headquarters in Washington, DC, and about 100 journalists and support staff hired so far across the Americas. CCTV America launched three new programs in February alone.

If you happen to switch on your radio in Galveston, TX, about 50 miles southeast of Houston, don't be surprised to hear, "You are listening to China Radio International." KGBC, a small AM station in Galveston, carries English-language programming by CRI, as do 13 stations in North America, including WILD in Boston and WNR in Philadelphia. Around the world, CRI broadcasts in more than 60 languages, nearly double the number on the BBC World Service.

One of the world's premier advertising spaces, an electronic billboard at 2 Times Square, also blinks a Chinese message. Last July, Xinhua, the government-owned news agency, leased a 40-by-60-foot LED sign there, a few months after it moved its North American headquarters from Queens to a tower on Broadway. Xinhua is already among the largest news agencies in the world, with more than 10,000 employees in 107 bureaus. In the developing world, especially, it competes on an equal footing with The Associated Press, Bloomberg News, and Reuters. Xinhua's Web-based English-language TV unit, CNC World, plans to expand into 100 countries.

At a time when most Western news outlets face budget cuts and retrenchment, the Chinese are rapidly expanding their global media presence. Hillary Clinton told the Senate Foreign Relations Committee in March 2010 that the US is losing the "information war" to new entrants like Al Jazeera and Russia Today—and CCTV.

In January, President Hu Jintao, writing in the Communist Party magazine *Qiu Shi* ("Seeking the Truth"), called on the Chinese to push back against Western cultural colonization: "The overall strength of Chinese culture and its international influence is not commensurate with China's

international status....International hostile forces are stepping up efforts to implement their strategies of westernizing and dividing China, with ideology and culture being key areas fields of their long-term infiltration."

**If CCTV can become the go-to channel for everyone in the world on a major story, even if only for a few days, it could change the game for good.**

Money opens doors, but what exactly is China selling with this new soft power? What is the Chinese version of the American Dream? As Han Han, a 29-year-old blogger, put it in a recent essay on Chinese art and culture: "The restriction on cultural activities makes it impossible for China to influence literature and cinema on a global basis. Or for us, the *culturati*, to raise our heads up proud." Is this also true for China's journalists? How can they reconcile the pursuit of truth with their government's history of trying to control the story?

I traveled to China last winter to get a glimpse of how China plans to make itself more attractive to the world. And more specifically, how it plans to begin to address a central question: Can many billions of dollars buy China's international media the credibility it so desperately seeks?

INITIALLY, AT LEAST, THE SIGNS DIDN'T LOOK PROMISING to me. Over two months and through several sources, I tried and failed to get access to the CCTV headquarters in Beijing. E-mails brought no replies, and people I spoke to were discouraging. It is almost impossible for an outsider, I was told, to get permission to visit the CCTV office. In desperation, I told CCTV that "access denied" would only reinforce the stereotype of China as a closed society. At the last minute, I received an e-mail from Liu Ge, the chief editor of CCTV News, who agreed to an interview.

CCTV's current headquarters is an imposing, spartan building, a far cry from *da kucha*. The guards at the front gate let you in only with an escort, and another layer of security awaits at the building's entrance. Inside, though, the mood is more relaxed. With spring festival around the corner, the lobby is decked with red lights and streamers. A chirpy intern guides me through long corridors and up a winding staircase until we reach a surprisingly small corner on the first floor—the newsroom and live-production hub of CCTV News, the global, 24-hour English-language news station.

Liu Ge greets me warmly and takes me to the production control room, where busy producers survey a maze of

screens, deciding what to put on air. This is in January, and as I watch the anchor cuts to a correspondent in Abu Dhabi, where the Chinese premier, Wen Jiabao, has just arrived for the World Energy Summit. Two days earlier, when Jiabao was in Riyadh, Chinese companies and the Saudi oil giant Aramco had signed a deal to develop a 400,000-barrel-a-day refinery on the Red Sea coast. Politically, too, the premier's visit to the Gulf was significant, as the Arab Spring has caused some anxiety among officials in Beijing. Naturally, China's global media coverage of the visit trumpeted its non-interventionist approach in Arab nations.

It provided an opening for me to ask Liu about what I saw as a significant obstacle to China's notion of going head to head with the likes of the BBC. Because state-controlled media can be a platform for the Communist Party to air its

views, its news becomes suspect to audiences who are used to journalists asking difficult questions of leaders.

Liu, who has worked in CCTV's international news team for 16 years and has seen English programming go from 30 minutes a day to a 24-hour operation, defended her team. "The West believes that bad news is always good news," she says. "In China, we believe in balancing news with social responsibility, so we do not provoke tensions in our society."

Like many of her colleagues, Liu is a member of the Communist Party. She has risen through the CCTV ranks over the years, but claims her party membership and journalistic career are unrelated. "We are doing news here, not propaganda," she insists, "and people must know that. No media is without agenda. If you look at BBC or CNN, they won't harm their national interest. So you cannot expect CCTV to go against Chinese interests."

So Liu does not claim to be objective. She just says that there is no such thing as objective journalism, that it's all agenda-driven. Fair enough. There are plenty of media critics in the West who feel the same way. Still, some of China's state media reports seem straight out of the foreign-ministry spokesman's mouth. For example, as Western governments and media criticized China and Russia for vetoing the UN Security Council resolution against Syria in February, CCTV published a Xinhua piece on its website headlined, "Harsh rhetoric against China's veto of Syria resolution is misleading." The story that followed lacked the kind of balance or nuance that Westerners associate with quality journalism.

Liu knows it will not be easy to change long-held perceptions of China in the West. "I don't think it's a problem that we are state-owned," she says. "A lot of our revenue is dependent on advertising, so we don't have as strong ties to the government as some may think."

**Boxers or (news) briefs?** The Chinese have nicknamed CCTV's new 54-story headquarters *da kucha*, or 'big boxer shorts.'



**CAN CCTV BECOME THE NEXT AL JAZEERA, A SERIOUS NEW player on the global broadcast field?** Some people familiar with the inner workings of CCTV are skeptical. One, Wang Xiqing, worked for CCTV News for nearly eight years before joining the BBC as a producer in the Beijing bureau. "They have the ambition, but I am not sure they have the wisdom," he says.

The tradition of top-down decision-making is a key flaw, in Xiqing's view: "Senior party officials call the shots, and sometimes they give you orders that do not fit into the world of journalism," he says.

At least one foreigner in the CCTV newsroom, Zakka Jacob, has a different take. Jacob was a TV presenter with India's *Headlines Today* before moving to Beijing as a CCTV News anchor. He points out one advantage of being a state broadcaster: "The single guiding factor for any TV channel in India was ratings," he says. "The absence of ratings gives me more elbow room to cover a story for what it is worth."

Jacob says he has never heard of stories being influenced by orders from the top. He is among nearly 50 non-Chinese



journalists who work at CCTV News's Beijing headquarters, and many more are being recruited. Most are native English speakers, hired as copy editors to smooth the rough edges of the language barrier.

CCTV's top management and editorial positions, meanwhile, are held by Chinese staff members, and the channel heads or presidents have to follow the dictates of the Propaganda Ministry, headed by Li Changchun. He is fifth in the pecking order of the Communist Party and *Forbes* magazine ranked him the world's 32nd most powerful person in 2010, describing him as the man who "controls what 1.3 billion Chinese see, hear and speak." CCTV's recently appointed president Hu Zhangfan was editor-in-chief of the party-owned *Guanming Daily*. Last year, at a conference, he was quoted as saying, "The first social responsibility and professional ethic of media staff should be understanding their role clearly and be a good mouthpiece." A lot of CCTV's success will depend on how much independence these high-ranking party officials give the journalists.

China's global media dreams hinge, to some degree, on covering regions and issues that Western broadcasters tend to ignore. "Your link to Asia" is the CCTV News tagline, and officials are betting that viewers from Asia and from developing nations will trust Chinese media more than they do their Western counterparts.

In Africa, for instance, China's widespread investment in local industries and infrastructure has led to growing economic clout and goodwill. For Africans weary of the West's bad-news-only coverage (poverty, political turmoil, natural disasters), CCTV offers a welcome alternative. On February 26, *Talk Africa* devoted its entire half hour to a London conference that brought together representatives from 50 countries to discuss solutions for Somalia. "New hope for Somalia" sounds like an overly optimistic title, but when you consider that the conference received almost no mention in the Western press, you begin to see how Chinese media can appeal to an African audience.

Still, China's ultimate target audience remains the big economic powers of the world, the nations and regions that make or break decisions in multilateral forums: the US, Europe, Japan, India, and South Korea. These are also China's geopolitical rivals, of course, and the most resistant to its influence.

So far, CCTV's primary effort to reach those targets is through its business programs—*Biz Asia* and *Biz Asia America*, the latter presented from Washington, DC, and from the NASDAQ in New York. Both shows emphasize China's position on key economic issues.

In addition to *Biz Asia America*, which is on daily, CCTV America airs two weekly programs. *The Heat* is a Saturday talk show on political topics in the US and Asia. On Sundays, the magazine program *Americas Now* takes an in-depth look at the Americas, particularly Central and South America. Produced by former *60 Minutes* hand Barbara Dury, *Americas Now* will have contributions from CCTV's 15 bureaus across the Americas, including Havana.



**Relax, don't do it** Liu Ge, a Communist Party member and chief editor of CCTV, advocates "balancing news with social responsibility, so we do not provoke tensions in our society."

The DC bureau has journalists with solid American network experience, from NBC, CBS, CNN, and Fox. They have been joined by two Chinese correspondents from Beijing, along with their boss, Ma Jing, the director general of CCTV America. CCTV News America can be seen in the Washington, DC, area through MHz networks as well as on Comcast and Dish TV. Wider distribution is planned.

AN ANGRY DRAGON ON A POSTAGE STAMP WAS CAUSING A stir while I was in Beijing. China Post had just released the stamp to commemorate the Chinese New Year, and this is the Year of the Dragon. But the fearsome creature on the stamp was accused by critics of scaring the world, and even some locals. Weibo, China's Twitter, was full of sarcasm about the fire-breathing diplomacy. "This shocking creature on the stamp could well be the emblem of the Foreign Ministry," read one Weibo post.

Dragons have been a symbol of Chinese imperial power for centuries, but the government actually prefers the cuddly panda bear, often using it as a diplomatic gift to other countries. After all, what's more softly powerful than a panda?

The dragon furor provides a glimpse into China's struggle with its image. The Chinese media effort to win global credibility is part of that struggle. Their mission is to bring what they see as China's "true picture" to the world in a way that seems, well, credible. "We have a young team that needs some time to develop its reporting skills," says Liu Ge, "but we have all the technology and other resources to compete



with BBC or CNN. It is matter of five years; you shall see us in the top league."

Perhaps. But a news organization looking to make a global splash needs a big story to put it on the map. Al Jazeera English was nowhere until the Arab Spring bloomed, a story on its home turf that it covered better than its more seasoned competition. CNN did the same with the first Gulf War, and became a household name across the world. The success of China's global media effort may depend on whether its media can identify that big story when it arrives, and then let the coverage prove their journalistic mettle to the world in a way that declarations from well-meaning editors and officials never will. If CCTV can become the go-to channel for everyone in the world, even if only for a few days, it could change the game for good.

And when such a moment does arrive, journalists must be able to ask tough, relevant questions, even of the Chinese leadership. Does the leadership have the stomach for that?

It would be easy to dismiss CCTV's global push as an expression of government propaganda, but the reality is more complex: it also reflects the growing influence of China's private sector, the peculiar brand of public-private capitalism that has powered the Chinese economic boom. While American soft power was largely a result of the creativity of its private sector, which made brands, technology, and cultural products that found global adulation, the Chinese version seems an efficient, assembly-line attempt. What's unclear is whether it will have the same creativity and attraction for the world.

Tao Xie is one Chinese intellectual who is critical of the leadership's narrow interpretation of soft power. Xie is an associate professor at Beijing's Foreign Studies University, with a PhD from Northwestern University and an acclaimed book on Sino-US relations. He describes himself as someone who likes to push the boundaries with the Chinese leadership, and he often criticizes party policies, even on "hostile" networks like the BBC.

Xie sees an economic motive behind his country's drive to globalize China's media, movies, and academics.

"How long can you keep investing in railroads, highways, and airports?" he asks. "At some point, you will run out of urban projects. And there are signs that the economy is slowing down. The leadership thinks these low-pollution, capital-intensive cultural industries could be the next growth engine for China, at least for a short period of time."

But can it work? "It looks increasingly to me that unless China has fundamental political change—transforming into a democracy—its security dilemma with US, India, or Japan will be difficult to soften, to say nothing of being eliminated," he says. "Unless our system becomes more transparent, so foreigners know what our military is doing, how our decisions are made internally, and the process of foreign policymaking, outsiders will continue to suspect us. And they will invite the US to maintain strategic balance in the region."

In soft-power terms, if the country with the better story wins, then China's political system just may be the villain of its own piece.



## The spy who came in from the code

*How a filmmaker accidentally gave up his sources to Syrian spooks*

BY MATTHIEU AIKINS

LAST FALL, "KARDOKH," A 25-YEAR-OLD DISSIDENT AND computer expert in the Syrian capital of Damascus, met with British journalist and filmmaker Sean McAllister. (Kardokh is his online pseudonym, used at his request.) McAllister, who's made award-winning films in conflict zones like Yemen and Iraq, explained that he was shooting a documentary for Britain's Channel 4 about underground activists in Syria, and asked if Kardokh would help him.

At the time, the situation in Syria was deteriorating rapidly, as protests against President Bashar al-Assad's repressive regime turned violent following a vicious crackdown by security forces. The Syrian government had drastically curtailed visits by foreign journalists, but McAllister had

managed to get in undercover. Kardokh was grateful for a chance to tell his story. "Any journalist who was making the effort to show the world what was happening, that was a very important thing for us," he told me in February.

At the time, Kardokh was providing computer expertise and secure communications to the resistance. He agreed to be interviewed about his work on camera by McAllister, who filmed his face, telling Kardokh that he would blur it out before publishing the footage. McAllister also asked Kardokh to put him in touch with other activists.

But some of McAllister's practices made him uneasy, Kardokh said. He worried that the filmmaker didn't realize how aggressive and pervasive the regime's surveillance was. Kardokh and his fellow activists took elaborate measures with their digital security, encrypting their communications and using special software to hide their identities online. "I

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started to feel that Sean was careless," Kardokh told me. He said he had urged McAllister to take more precautions in his communications and to encrypt his footage. "He was using his mobile and SMS, without any protections."

Then, in October, McAllister was arrested by Syrian security agents. He wasn't harmed, but was held for five days and said that he could hear the cries of prisoners being tortured in nearby rooms. Eventually, he was released and returned to the UK. "I didn't realize exactly what they were risking until I went into that experience," McAllister said in an interview on Channel 4 after his release.

The Syrians had interrogated McAllister about his activities, and seized his laptop, mobile phone, camera, and footage. All of McAllister's research was now at the disposal of Syrian intelligence. When Kardokh heard that McAllister had been arrested, he didn't hesitate—he turned off his mobile phone, packed his bag, and fled Damascus, staying with relatives in a nearby town before escaping to Lebanon. He said that other activists who had been in touch with McAllister fled the country as well, and several of those who didn't were arrested. "I was happy that I hadn't put him in contact with more people," Kardokh said.

Rami Jarah, a Syrian activist based in Cairo, said that he tried to help another activist, known as Omar al-Baroudi, get out of the country after McAllister's arrest. "He was terrified," Jarah said. "His face was in those videos. He said that his number was on Sean's phone." The next day, Baroudi disap-

peared, and Jarah said that he has not been heard from since.

Officials at Channel 4 say they took action to help McAllister's sources after his arrest. "We have been in contact with everyone who felt at risk because they spoke to Sean," said Amy Lawson, the channel's head of communications. "He is an experienced filmmaker and took steps to protect his material. Syria is an extremely difficult environment to work in, so we continue to look for ways to minimize that risk whilst ensuring we tell this important story."

It's easy to argue that McAllister should have taken stronger precautions, but what, exactly? How many reporters are familiar enough with the technical aspects of digital security that they could protect their computers and phones from the Syrian intelligence service? The fact that McAllister, an experienced and committed journalist, jeopardized his sources with inadequate digital precautions is indicative of a broader problem in journalism today: We haven't kept pace with technological advancements that have revolutionized both information-gathering and surveillance.

After researching the subject of digital security, I realized that there have been occasions in my own work as a freelancer covering the conflicts in Libya and Afghanistan when I've exposed myself and my sources by carrying unencrypted data or e-mailing sensitive information over insecure channels. It's unclear what, if anything, major news organizations are doing about it. When *CJR's* Alysia Santo recently tried asking outlets like *The New York Times*, she got a firm "no comment." Curious, I e-mailed an informal survey to journalist friends and colleagues, and several who've worked as senior correspondents in Afghanistan for major US news outlets said they'd had little-to-no formal training or assistance from their organizations in digital security.

"I think that the journalism community in the US, and to some degree elsewhere, is just beginning to grasp the fact that they need to protect their information and, by extension, their sources," said Frank Smyth, who is the senior adviser for journalist security at the Committee to Protect Journalists and also runs a private company, Global Journalist Security. "It's just too easy to get in and lift their information or monitor their communications without them ever knowing they were compromised."

For correspondents who report from conflict zones or on underground activism in repressive regimes, the risks are extremely high. Recently, two excellent investigative series—by *The Wall Street Journal* and Bloomberg News—and the release of a large trove of surveillance industry documents by Wikileaks dubbed "The Spy files," provided a glimpse of just how sophisticated off-the-shelf monitoring technologies have become. Western companies have sold mass Web and e-mail surveillance technology to Libya and Syria, for instance, and in Egypt, activists found specialized software

## Encryption is your friend

*Four easy ways to protect yourself and your sources*

- Depending on whether you use Windows, Mac, or Linux, there is a variety of built-in or free software for encrypting your hard drive. The Electronic Freedom Foundation offers a great tutorial on the subject, so visit its website and set aside an evening when your computer can finish the encryption uninterrupted overnight.
- Encryption only works if you have a strong password. That means long, random, and hard to guess. Experts recommend choosing a long "passphrase," consisting of five or more words strung together, which is easier to memorize.
- Switch to HTTPS and your computer will communicate with websites using encryption, meaning third parties can't decipher your data even if they're eavesdropping. Gmail does this automatically, and you can enable the feature in your account settings on Facebook, Twitter, and a number of other sites.
- Turn on your firewall to help block unauthorized access to your computer. Do this in the Security menu in Control Panel, if you're using Windows, or in System Preferences, if you're using Mac.

that allowed the government to listen in to Skype conversations. In Bahrain, meanwhile, technology sold by Nokia Siemens allowed the government to monitor cell-phone conversations and text messages.

Journalists are tempting targets for spies armed with these technologies. During a reporting trip to Libya after the revolution, I spoke with former members of Qaddafi's regime who told me that there had been an extensive program of surveillance targeting journalists both online and at the Rixos Hotel, where foreign correspondents visiting Tripoli were required to stay.

One of the sources, Marwan Arebi, was in charge of information technology at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and had access to Libyan intelligence correspondence. He says hackers working for the regime had been able to access the accounts of foreign journalists using simple techniques, such as embedding a so-called Trojan-horse virus in a video ostensibly about human-rights violations in Tripoli, and then sending it to reporters. When the reporters opened the video file, spyware would be installed, allowing Qaddafi's spies to access their computers remotely. Arebi said he was given access to the e-mail accounts of journalists working at CNN and other media organizations. "The problem wasn't the sophistication of the tools, but rather the lack of knowledge of the reporters," he said. "I think many sources who were speaking to these correspondents have been captured or killed."

Arebi, no fan of Qaddafi, was secretly in contact with the Libyan opposition. In an attempt to warn the people named in the e-mails, he contacted Ahmed Ali, a Libyan activist in the US at the time, and passed him a list of the journalists who'd been hacked, as well as a spreadsheet which showed the names, phone numbers, and e-mail addresses of underground sources in Tripoli that he said he'd obtained from a CNN account. As proof, he provided the journalist's username and password to Ali, and Ali was able to log into the journalist's CNN account with Outlook. Ali then passed along the information to CNN. A CNN spokeswoman told me the network had been informed of "a possible breach," and had taken steps to remedy it. She declined to go into further detail.

Ali later showed me the spreadsheet, which included detailed information about sources in Tripoli who were in contact with the regime. One entry, titled "Hasan," included a phone number and read: "Eyewitness who did not want to be named even with first name. Has a land line to prove he is in Tripoli but does not want to talk on it." The spreadsheet's authors also seemed to recognize the sensitivity of the information: "Please keep these contacts internal for just the int'l desk—and our team in Cairo. Do not pass these around to shows, etc." Chillingly, Ahmed Ali recognized his fiancée's phone number, though her name was not mentioned—she was still in Tripoli at the time. "I told her she needed to ditch that SIM card," he said.

Despite the fact that the technology is complex and always changing, there are some basic practices that reporters can

learn about online—such as how to encrypt your hard drive—that will only take an evening or two to implement. [For a checklist, see previous page.] These precautions should extend to your smartphone as well. Look for a model that offers hardware encryption, and lock it with a longer password that includes random numbers and letters. It's not rocket science (though it would have helped the NASA engineers who, it was reported in March, lost an unencrypted laptop with codes for the International Space Station).

**'It's just too easy to get in and lift their information or monitor their communications,' security expert Frank Smyth says, 'without them knowing they were compromised.'**

If you're reporting from a country with sophisticated electronic surveillance capabilities, like China or Iran, or trying to shield sources from Western intelligence agencies, then the techniques involved are more complicated and might require expert assistance. News organizations need to have in-house resources for their reporters, and they should offer assistance to the freelancers with whom they work.

Smyth, who helps train journalists in security practices, believes that part of the problem is one of mindset, as veteran reporters and editors find it frustrating and unnecessary to change longstanding practices. "You're asking someone who's already established and proven themselves to learn a new language," he said.

Too many journalists I spoke to still regard digital security as an esoteric province of the technically inclined, and expressed fatalism that if "they" want to get it from you, they'll get it. But as our research methods and communications are increasingly digitized, we need to accept that digital security is a fundamental aspect of the trade, as basic as maintaining accurate notes or paying attention to libel law.

The stakes can be incredibly high. Kardokh is still hiding. He's now working on the Cyber Arabs Project, sponsored by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting, which aims to build an out-of-the-box laptop and mobile kit for activists that supports secure and anonymous communication.

Kardokh said that he is still grateful that McAllister helped draw attention to the situation in Syria, and noted that Channel 4 had been very active in providing assistance to their sources after the arrest. "For me, this was enough to say that Sean is still a friend," he told me. He wished, though, that journalists would better inform themselves about the risks before visiting. "I think Western journalists can't imagine the power of the regime here."



## Censory overload

*How a reluctant journalist used his software skills to aid the Arab Spring*

BY WALID AL-SAQAF

JANUARY 26, 2011, WAS JUST ANOTHER COLD WINTER DAY in Sweden, where I attend graduate school. I returned to my office from a coffee break to dozens of e-mails saying that the websites of Facebook and Twitter had been blocked in Egypt, apparently in response to massive demonstrations the day before in Tahrir Square, calling for the end of Hosni Mubarak's regime. The activists there desperately needed a way to bypass censorship. I sat down at my computer and did my best to get the word out about software programs that would help them, including my own.

This was a long way from where I began, but in a sense, I'd also come full circle. When I graduated from Middle East Technical University in Ankara in 1998 I'd returned home to Yemen, eager to start a career as a software developer. But my father had other plans for me.

The man others referred to as Professor Abdulaziz Al-Saqaf (1952–1999) had just marked the eighth anniversary of his founding of the *Yemen Times*, the country's first English-language newspaper. He launched the paper the same year North and South Yemen joined to form a single country, led by the fearsome Ali Abdullah Saleh, a Saddam Hussein crony who was the longtime leader of the north.

My father and I did not have much in common. A Harvard alumnus, my dad had remarkable communication skills and a vast network of contacts across the globe; I wasn't very sociable. He courageously exposed corruption and injustice, while I tended to distance myself from politics. As much as I hate to admit it, I was scared of confronting anyone in uniform. I did admire his bravery—yet I also felt he was constantly putting himself and the paper at risk. I was selfishly set on a career in Silicon Valley, while he was struggling to help his people.

I respected my dad's love for journalism, but to me, it seemed boring, dull, and low-paying. One night, he suggested I work beside him in the *Yemen Times* editorial department for a year. I remember storming out, saying, "Sorry, Dad, I can't do it!" But after a chat with my mother, I apologized and agreed to be an assistant editor and network administrator—at least until October 1999, when I would be leaving for the US to study computer engineering. I thought to myself, Why not just help Dad out? After all, it's just temporary. Or at least that's what I thought.

### A change in priorities

On June 2, 1999, I got the news that after leaving a lunch meeting with Abubakr Al-Qirbi (now foreign minister) and others, my father had been hit by a speeding Mercedes on Hadda Street in Sana'a, the Yemeni capital. I had always seen

him as strong and invincible, refusing to back down from even the most ruthless political foes, including President Saleh, who had threatened him on more than one occasion. Seeing his body in the morgue was simply unbearable.

Being the eldest son, I had to take charge of the family business, and so I became the editor in chief and publisher of *Yemen Times* at the age of 26. A few weeks after my father's death, a letter arrived that he'd been anxiously waiting for: I had been granted a Fulbright scholarship to study at the University of California, Davis. I asked for a one-year deferment.

A year later, still clinging to my personal dream, I left the newspaper in the hands of my sister, Nadia, who had since graduated from college, and my mother, an English-language teacher, and set off for UC Davis with my pregnant wife to start my graduate work. But then came the second shock: Just three months later, in December 2000, my mother died of a brain hemorrhage. Despite my protestations of independence, I did not hesitate to return home. I realized it was my destiny to resume the journalism career that I tried to avoid so desperately. I had to surrender to my fate and say farewell to my Silicon Valley ambitions.

Fast forwarding to 2005, I confess that I am glad I did. It was a steep learning curve, but I realized why my father loved what he was doing: It was because of the inner satisfaction one gets from giving people a voice, exposing injustice, and promoting human values. Those were things that a geek behind a keyboard could not have done.

While editing the paper, I faced no direct censorship. But there was constant self-censorship, due to the strict press laws. Many topics involving religion, the military, foreign relations, and government officials were taboo.

After six years at the helm of *Yemen Times*, it was time for another international challenge. I handed the paper back to my sister, Nadia (who had just completed her master's degree), and plunged into a five-month Alfred Friendly Press Fellowship program in *The Wall Street Journal's* Washington, DC, bureau. I interviewed high-profile political figures, participated in major conferences, observed voting sessions and debates in Congress, and even made it inside the White House press room. It was a thrilling experience.

When I finally got around to my graduate study, it was in journalism, not computer science—and I knew I would eventually head back to Yemen to share what I'd learned. While

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pursuing a master's in global journalism at Orebro University in Sweden, I continued to write articles for the *Yemen Times* and occasionally the Dubai-based *Gulf News*. A year into the program, I was asked to do a media project for a course and realized I could perhaps start a news-related website.

### Another door opens

I remember vividly the day in 2006 when I stood up and wrote the words YEMEN PORTAL on the white board. Immediately, I sensed curiosity and interest from my classmates. I said I thought it was time for someone to build a multilingual search engine that could aggregate news and opinion on Yemen from dozens of news websites and present the information in a clear and readable manner. Little did I know that Yemen Portal would mark another turning point in my life.

Within six months, Yemen Portal featured tens of thousands of articles from dozens of sources and was among the top websites in Yemen. In late 2007, I returned home to do focus groups for my master's thesis. Observing Web traffic patterns, I had noted that news from dissident sites was more popular than stories from government sources. Indeed, since the site's presentation gives priority to the stories that are the most read and commented upon, Yemen Portal clearly showed widespread interest in articles that were extremely critical of the state and of President Saleh. I discussed this openly during the focus groups and then, while I was still in Yemen, something truly awful happened.

On January 19, 2008, Yemen Portal went dark. I tried various computers, but all returned the same "Server timeout" error message. I frantically called a friend in Sweden to check the site. He said it was opening fine at his end. I realized then that my website has been censored.

I called the Internet Service Provider (ISP), which is state-owned, but got nowhere. I later confirmed that government operatives had blocked the site inside Yemen, claiming it was a security risk since it contained inflammatory anti-Saleh content. Looking back to the traffic logs a few days before the website was censored, I found a spike in readership on January 13, which I could trace to several articles and video links on an anti-government protest in the southern city of Aden as well as articles about a subsequent attack that killed some protestors. It seemed that readers were turning to my website for news about the protest, so the regime decided to make it inaccessible inside Yemen.

Frustrated by this injustice, I rallied other website administrators, and together we launched a nationwide protest against censorship—it turned out Yemen Portal was not the only website being blocked by the authorities. The campaign was covered by the Swedish newspaper *Nerikes Allehanda* but had little result.

Still, I knew there was another way: Over the next few weeks, I developed software that would allow users to access Yemen Portal—and all the other blocked sites—via a Web-based proxy. My actions did not go unnoticed; my car in Sana'a was

vandalized, but by that time I had already returned to Sweden. I realized that the regime was willing to take violent action against me, but I refused to surrender to government blackmail.

Calling upon connections I had made while editing *Yemen Times*, I was able to draw attention to the regime's repressive practices, with help from a number of organizations such as the World Association of Newspapers, Reporters Sans Frontiers, Article 19, and the Committee to Protect Bloggers.



**Daddy hero** Professor Abdulaziz Al-Saqqaf received a Freedom of Expression award at the National Press Club in Washington in 1995.

### A way around censorship

In 2009, as my cyber war with the Yemeni authorities intensified, I released a software solution named Alkasir (which means "the circumventor" in Arabic). I built it as a research tool for my PhD study on Internet censorship, but it has turned out to be useful to activists as well. The Alkasir software provides access to blocked websites anywhere in the world through an alternative tunnel that is encrypted. The Internet Service Provider cannot detect which blocked websites an Alkasir user is seeing, because traffic to and from censored websites goes through a tunnel to the proxy, which in turn retrieves the site's content and delivers it to the user dynamically. Alkasir also helps users avoid detection, because it tunnels only blocked websites, while letting nonblocked content flow directly through the regular ISP.

While working on Alkasir, I stayed in touch with activists in Yemen and started to develop connections throughout the Arab world. Several wrote me from Tunisia, explaining how they used the software to circumvent censorship and upload content to websites that were blocked. I spread the word on [alkasir.com](http://alkasir.com).

As the world now knows, the activists were able to get their message out; the protests that followed the self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi triggered the Tunisian revolution, which led to the downfall of Zine El Abidine Ben Ali.



A few weeks after the Tunisian uprising, on January 25, 2011, more than 1 million angry Egyptians filled the streets of Cairo, mobilized via social networking websites such as Facebook and Twitter. The next day, Egyptian authorities resorted to censoring social sites and jamming mobile network traffic. A Twitter search for the phrase “#jan25 proxy” on January 26 shows that many users were sharing information about censor circumvention tools, and I did what I could to help—via Facebook, Twitter, and e-mail both to mailing lists and to fellow Arab activists. Alkasir traffic spiked. Activist Ahmed Zidan later said in a CNN interview how important Alkasir was for him and others to retain access to social networking websites that proved crucial in the Egyptian revolution.

My contribution was modest, compared to the sacrifices made by those on the scene. Nonetheless, I feel a sense of satisfaction in knowing that I was able to help the Arab Spring

protesters access the Internet and publish content during the uprising. Meanwhile, closer to home, in February of this year longtime Yemeni president Ali Abdullah Saleh, my late father's nemesis, finally stepped down.

As my dad taught me, access to information is power. I am confident that if he were alive today, he would have supported the Arab youth struggle for freedom and helped integrate technology into the newsroom to support a free and open flow of information to the public.

There is a lot yet to be done before the Arab world is free from tyranny and oppression. Cyber censorship remains in Syria, Iran, China, and other countries. It has become vital for activists to access blocked content. I hope my father would be proud that my software now has tens of thousands of users in countries struggling with online censorship. I dedicate all my work to his memory.



## Meanwhile, in the Land of the Free...

*In the US, you can still say almost anything, but someone just may be listening in*

BY DAN GILLMOR

IN DECEMBER 2010, THE MAJOR PAYMENT SYSTEMS USED to buy goods and services online decided that Wikileaks was no longer an acceptable customer. Mastercard, Visa, and PayPal summarily cut off service, putting Wikileaks into deep financial trouble and further marginalizing an organization that had become an object of fear and loathing inside the US government and other centers of wealth and power.

While many in the new media world sounded an alarm, the response of journalists from legacy news organizations was mostly silence, except to take note of what had happened. By ignoring the implications of what had happened—a financial blockade of an organization engaged in recognizably journalistic pursuits—traditional media people demonstrated how little they understood or appreciated the information ecosystem in which they also exist. And by failing to object, loudly, they gave tacit assent to tactics that should chill people who genuinely believe in free speech.

It was not the first time traditional journalists failed to grasp a fundamental reality: Governments and businesses are creating choke points inside that emerging ecosystem—points of control where interests unfriendly to journalism can create not just speed bumps on the fabled information highway, but outright barricades.

This is not just an issue for journalists in places like China or Saudi Arabia or Russia, where governments are creating more and more stringent restrictions on what people can say and do online. It is an American matter as well. In the developed world, Hollywood and other corporate interests have taken the lead in threatening the Internet's freewheeling nature—and they've had plenty of help from government.

The Obama administration has pushed gratifyingly hard to open up speech for dissidents in dictatorships, and decried censorship elsewhere. Yet the US government has also acted to curb online communications it deems objectionable. While this clampdown is often in service of the copyright lobby, the tactics have sometimes smacked more of authoritarian regimes than of the American tradition. The administration's campaign against Wikileaks and prosecutions of journalists' sources highlight the vulnerability of journalism, and the public's right to know, in this networked age, what government is doing in our names and with our money. Years ago, when mass media had achieved economies of scale that created significant barriers to entry, media critics worried about consolidation of a different kind. A small number of giant companies increasingly owned the media most Americans read, watched, and listened to each day. This was a legitimate fear, and while Congress allowed significant concentration it didn't allow utter dominance by any single corporate entity. Even so, journalism was dominated by newspaper monopolists at the local level and a cozy oligopoly nationally.

In theory and, so far, mostly in practice, the Internet broke things open. We all came to own a printing press, we

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believed, and we could make what we created available to a potentially global audience.

But a new kind of corporate oligopoly is emerging. Coupled with increasingly controlling activities by government, often in concert with corporate interests, the new choke points threaten to re-centralize media, or at least return control to a few dominant parties. Who are they?

Start with telecommunications carriers. There are two main kinds: wired-line and mobile. Among the former, in most American communities there are, at most, two "broadband" service providers: the cable and phone companies. Keep in mind that both were at one time monopolies established with government protection. (Also keep in mind that cable is vastly superior in bandwidth in most places, in part due to the lack of fiber investment by the phone industry, and is rapidly becoming the de facto broadband provider where it's available.) These wired-line carriers believe that they should be able to decide what bits of information get delivered in what order and at what speed, if they get delivered at all. Think about what that means: the ability to play favorites in content. Most broadband carriers have instituted bandwidth caps; Comcast has even canceled the service of those who've used too much. Carriers are also becoming content providers themselves, as Comcast did when it bought NBC Universal, creating a plain conflict of interest.

This is why a principle called "network neutrality" has emerged in recent years. It essentially says that the carriers should not favor one kind of content, or conversation, over another. The carriers have challenged the Federal Communications Commission's tiny moves toward network neutrality, and it's not hard to see why. If they can have a duopoly, with little incentive to truly compete, they can use that dominance to cut deals with big content companies at the expense of smaller players, including what startup media operations might want to provide. And as the carriers become content providers themselves, the incentive to make these choices grows. Comcast says that its own streaming video service won't count against its bandwidth cap, unlike streaming video services it doesn't own; a loophole in the FCC's already-weak regulations may give the cable giant cover. (Note: I own a small number of shares in Netflix, which offers a video streaming service that does count against the cap.)

The serious potential for problems with wired-line broadband is nothing next to the actual situation with mobile carriers. They've already won the FCC's approval to discriminate in their network practices, and they have bandwidth limits a fraction the size of wired-line carriers' limits. Clearly they cannot handle the kind of traffic that a cable or DSL line can bear, given network limitations, but they're using relative scarcity to create customer-controlling business models. Recently, AT&T's mobile arm declared its interest in charging some application developers for

preferred connections to their customers. Who could afford that? Companies like Facebook, certainly, but smaller players would be hard-pressed to compete in such an environment.

The telecommunications industry is hardly the only choke point looming in our future. The copyright industries have every intention of being another. Hollywood and its allies have some rational worries, in particular the possibility that file-sharing sites beyond the reach of the law will destroy their businesses by making unstoppable infringement the rule rather than the exception. But it's worth noting that the major film studios have a longstanding loathing of technology they can't control—at least until it makes them money, as with videotape, once Hollywood's top object of paranoia. In the Internet era, copyright holders have gotten Congress to write increasingly restrictive laws designed to prevent infringement but which have dramatic side effects; you are not legally allowed to back up the DVD you purchased, for example, nor can you quote from it by "ripping" a small segment to another file. The copyright lobby didn't pull off its most brazen attempted coup early in 2012, when Internet users and companies rose up against the House of Representatives' "Stop Online Piracy Act" and companion Senate legislation. These laws would have created outright Internet censorship in some cases, and a long-range effect, venture capitalists warned, would have been to slow innovation in any area where the entertainment industry felt threatened. Distressingly, if not surprisingly, these issues have received scant coverage from the major television news channels, whose corporate parents have huge entertainment interests and have overwhelmingly supported harsh copyright laws.

## Beyond encryption

*Hold the phone! And other security strategies...*

ENCRYPTED MESSAGING IS JUST ONE OF MANY TECHNIQUES that journalists should be deploying in the digital age. I asked Christopher Soghoian, a security expert, what he would recommend as top defenses for journalists and their sources. Besides using disk encryption on your laptop (see sidebar, page 24), he replied, in an e-mail that I've edited slightly, mainly to expand abbreviations:

- Don't talk to sources using the telephone, even if you don't directly talk about the issue. Telephones leave records behind. If you do need to talk to them using a cell phone, Fed-Ex them a prepaid phone, and tell them not to use it, or even turn it on, near their home/office.

- Use commercial virtual private networks (VPNs), which cost five bucks or so a month.

- Don't use e-mail. If you have to talk and it can't be in person, I like instant messaging with OTR encryption ([www.cypherpunks.ca](http://www.cypherpunks.ca), built into AdiumX and available for Pidgin).

—Dan Gillmor

We should never underestimate Congress' talent for getting cyber-issues wrong. Even as lawmakers backed away from the dangerous SOPA legislation, they took up "cyber-security" bills that would be even more of a threat to the Internet, legislation that would give government vast new powers and all but compel telecommunications companies to spy on their customers. As I write this, support was building for a draconian bill, but its fate is unclear.

## The Obama administration may have been the least friendly to journalism of any, regardless of party, in recent times.

As it turns out, Hollywood has persuaded the Obama administration on a number of occasions to use (or misuse) existing law against services it deems to be infringing. In a case that journalists did cover, the administration confiscated the domain name of hip-hop website dajaz1.com in November 2010—and then stonewalled requests for information and redress, the site's attorney told reporters. Not until a year later did the government return the domain name, with no serious explanation and a minimal expression of regret for an act of outright censorship. It's difficult to imagine the American government taking a newspaper's website offline, or preventing it from delivering its print copies; yet something like that happened in this case. (Disclosure: The First Amendment Coalition, a nonprofit organization of which I am a member of the board, has taken an interest in this case.)

Entertainment companies aren't the only corporate interests that threaten journalists' ability to do their jobs. Private companies are creating their own ecosystems, with minimal regulatory interference, that news organizations find tantalizingly useful but which may turn out to be a mixed blessing.

Consider Apple. The news industry's longstanding love affair with what has become the most valuable company on Earth expanded with the death of Steve Jobs. But Apple has a long history of controlling behavior. If you create a journalism app to be sold in the iPhone or iPad marketplace, you explicitly give Apple the right to decide whether your journalism content is acceptable under the company's vague guidelines. Apple has used this to block material it considers improper, including (until the company came under fire for this) refusing for a time to allow Mark Fiore, who has won a Pulitzer Prize for his cartoons, to sell his own app. Given the dominance Apple now enjoys in the tablet market, journalists should have a Plan B. Apple's paranoia (not too strong a word) and secretive ways have led it to attack journalism itself. In 2004 the company tried to force several websites to disclose their sources in their Apple coverage; the case was a direct challenge to fundamental business-journalism practices. (Note: I played a small role in

that case, filing declarations on behalf of the websites that they were engaged in protected journalism.)

Facebook is another potential threat to independent journalism. Most journalists feel they have no choice but to use the social networking service, which has become by far the most dominant site online. But Facebook's walled-garden approach—it is creating what amounts to an alternative Internet—brings risks. Moreover, Facebook and a small number of other technology companies are capturing the bulk of online advertising. Amazingly, more and more news organizations are outsourcing their online commenting to Facebook, further solidifying the position of a company that gains vastly more from these arrangements—namely detailed information on users' browsing habits—than it gives up. To the extent that journalists participate in their ecosystems, they are fueling their top competitors.

That competition clearly includes search engines. Google, for example, has enormous power to decide who is visible, and has collected staggering amounts of data on our individual preferences and how we use the Internet. So far, the company has behaved in mostly benign ways. But it may not always be in the hands of people who take seriously the "don't be evil" mantra the founders established at the beginning.

Government regulators are taking closer looks at the technology companies. This is potentially an important brake on abuse. But as we've seen repeatedly, Republican presidents tend not to enforce antitrust laws with anywhere near the effort—such as it is—that Democrats bring.

It has taken news people too long to understand this, but the Obama administration may have been the least friendly to journalism of any, regardless of party, in recent times—notably in its zeal to prosecute leakers and penchant for secrecy. It's impossible to know to what extent the government has used post-2001 authority to keep an eye on journalists' communications with sources, or at least to find out who the sources were after the fact. What is clear is that prosecutions of sources have expanded dramatically, and that journalists need to upgrade their own techniques and technology when it comes to protecting sources. (See sidebar.) Despite a number of worthy initiatives to open up some government data, moreover, the administration has by many accounts been more secretive than its predecessors on matters of vital public interest. And as noted earlier, the administration's pursuit of Wikileaks and Julian Assange, with some unfortunate cheerleading from journalists who should know better, ultimately is a threat to all journalism and free speech.

The promise of the Internet was profound: a radically decentralized, democratized medium where anyone could publish and anyone could be heard. The reaction from industries and governments that feel threatened by the Net is to re-centralize. This may simply be the nature of modern capitalism and government, and the forces of control are getting more powerful every day. They are a direct threat to journalism and innovation. Journalists are at long last starting to take note—and we can only hope it's not too late. **CJR**

THE REPORTER'S VOICE

## The reporter who saw it coming

*Mike Hudson thought he was merely exposing injustice, but he also was unearthing the roots of a global financial meltdown*

**Mike Hudson** began reporting on the subprime mortgage business in the early 1990s when it was still a marginal, if ethically challenged, business. From his street-level perspective, he could see the abuses and asymmetries of the market in a way that the conventional business press could not. But because it appeared mostly in small publications, his reporting was largely ignored. Hudson pursued the story nationally, via a muckraking book, *Merchants*

of Misery; in a 10,000-word exposé on Citigroup-as-subprime-factory, which won a Polk Award in 2004 for the magazine *Southern Exposure*; and in a series on the subprime leader, *Ameriquest*, for the *Los Angeles Times* in 2005. He continued to pursue the subject as it metastasized into the trillion-dollar center of the Financial Crisis of 2008—briefly at *The Wall Street Journal* and now at the Center for Public Integrity. In 2010 he published *The Monster: How a Gang of Predatory Lenders and Wall Street Bankers Fleeced America—and Spawned a Global Crisis*. Hudson, 50, is the son of an ex-Marine who also was a legendary local basketball coach. He started out on rural weeklies, covering championship tomatoes and large fish, even producing a cooking column. But as a reporter for *The Roanoke Times*, he turned to muckraking and never looked back. CJR's **Dean Starkman** interviewed Hudson in the spring of 2011. A longer version of their conversation is at [cjr.org/feature/hudson.php](http://cjr.org/feature/hudson.php).

involving Associates [First Capital Corp., then a unit of Ford Motor Company]. Basically, it turned out that Ford, the old-line carmaker, was the biggest subprime lender in the country. The evidence was pretty clear that they were doing many of the same kinds of bait-and-switch salesmanship and, in some cases, pure fraud, that we later saw take over the mortgage market. I felt like this was a big story; this is the one! Later, investigations and congressional hearings corroborated what I was finding in '94, '95, and '96. And it seems so self-evident now, but I learned that ex-employees often give you a window into what's really going on with a company. The problem has always been finding them and getting them to talk.

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DEAN STARKMAN, CJR's Kingsford Capital fellow, runs *The Audit*, our online critique of business and economic coverage. His book, *The Watchdog That Didn't Bark*, about the business press and the financial meltdown, will be published this year by Columbia University Press.

### Follow the ex-employees

I was doing a series on poverty in Roanoke, and one of the local legal aid attorneys said, "It's not just the lack of money—it's also what happens when they try to get out of poverty." He said there are three ways out: They bought a house, so they got some equity; they bought a car, so they could get some mobility; or they went back to school to get a better job. And he had example after example of folks who, because they were doing that, had gotten deeper in poverty, trapped in unbelievable debt.

His clients often dealt with for-profit trade schools—truck-driving schools that would close down, medical-assistant schools that no one hired from. And they'd end up three, four, five, eight thousand dollars in debt, unable to repay it, and then of course be prevented from ever again going back to school because they couldn't get another student loan. So that got me thinking about what I came to know as the poverty industry.

I applied for an Alicia Patterson Fellowship and proposed doing stories on check-cashing outlets, pawn shops, second-mortgage lenders (they didn't call themselves "subprime" in those days). This was '91. I came across a wire story about something called the Boston "second-mortgage scandal," and got somebody to send me a thick stack of clips. It was really impressive. *The Boston Globe* and other news organizations were taking on the lenders and the mortgage brokers, and the closing attorneys, and on and on.

I was trying to make the story not just local but national. I had some local cases



### Subprime goes mainstream

In the fall of 2002, the Federal Trade Commission announced a big settlement with Citigroup, which had bought Associates, and at first I saw it as a positive development, like they had nailed the big, bad actor. I'm doing a 1,000-word freelance thing, but as I started to report I heard from people who were saying that this settlement is basically giving Citigroup absolution, and allowing them to move forward with what was, by Citi standards, a pretty modest settlement. And the other thing that struck me was the media were treating this as though Citigroup was cleaning up this legacy problem, when Citi itself had its own problems. There had been a big *New York* magazine story about [Citigroup Chief Sanford I.] "Sandy" Weill. It was like "Sandy's Comeback." I saw this and said, "Whoa, this is an example of the mainstreaming of subprime."



Mike Hudson

I pitched a story about how these settlements weren't what they seemed, and got turned down a lot of places. Eventually I called the editor of *Southern Exposure*, Gary Ashwill, and he said, "That's a great story; we'll put it on the cover."

I interviewed 150 people, mostly borrowers, attorneys, experts, industry people—but the stuff that really moved the story were the former employees.

As a result of the Citigroup stuff, I got a call from a filmmaker [James Scurlock] who was working on what eventually became *Maxed Out*, about credit cards and student loans and all that kind of stuff. And he asked if I could go visit, and in some cases revisit, some of the people I had interviewed and he would follow me with a camera. So I did sessions in rural Mississippi, Brooklyn and Queens, and Pittsburgh. Again and again you would hear people talk about these bad loans they got. But also about stress. I remember a guy in Brooklyn, not too far from where I live now, who paused and said something along the lines of: "You know I'm not proud of this, but I have to say I really considered killing myself." Again and again

people talked about how bad they felt about having gotten into these situations. They didn't understand, in many cases, that they'd been taken in by very skillful salesmen who manipulated them into taking out loans that were bad for them.

If one person tells you that story, you think maybe it's true, but you don't know. But you've got a woman in San Francisco saying, "I was lied to and here's how they lied to me," and a loan officer for the same company in suburban Kansas saying, "This is what we did to people." And then you have another loan officer in Florida and another borrower in another state. You start to see the pattern.

I was not talking to analysts. I was not talking to high-level corporate executives. I was not talking to experts. I was talking to the lowest-level people in the industry—loan officers, branch managers. I was talking to borrowers. And I was doing it across the country and doing it in large numbers. And when you actually did the shoe-leather reporting, you came up with a very different picture than the PR spin you were getting at the high level.

One day, Rich Lord [who recently published the muckraking book, *American Nightmare: Predatory Lending and the Foreclosure of the American Dream*] and I were sitting in his study. Rich had written a lot about Household International [parent of Household Finance], and I had written a lot about Citigroup. Household had been number one in subprime, and now Citi-Financial/Citigroup was number one. This was in the fall of 2004. We wondered, who's next? Rich suggested Ameriquest.

I started looking up Ameriquest cases, and found lots of borrower suits and ex-employee suits. There was one in particular, which basically said that the guy had been fired because he had complained that Ameriquest's business ethics were terrible. I found the guy in the Kansas City phone book, and he told me a really compelling story. One of the things that really stuck out is, he said to me, "Have you ever seen the movie *Boiler Room* [the 2000 film about an unethical pump-and-dump brokerage firm]?"

By the time I had roughly 10 former employees, most of them willing to be on the record, I thought: This is a really important story. Ameriquest at that point was on its way to being the largest subprime lender. So I started trying to pitch it.

The *Los Angeles Times* liked the story and teamed me with Scott Reckard, and we worked through much of the fall of 2004 and early 2005. We had 30 or so former employees, almost all of them basically saying that they had seen illegal practices, some of whom acknowledged that they'd done it themselves: bait-and-switch salesmanship, inflating people's incomes on loan applications, inflating appraisals. Or they were cutting and pasting W2s or faking a tax return. It was called the "art department"—blatant forgery, doctoring the documents. In a sense I feel like I helped them become whistleblowers because they had no idea what to do. One of the best details was that many people said they showed *Boiler Room*—as a training tape! And the other important thing about the story was that Ameriquest was being held up by politicians, and even by the media, as the gold standard—the company cleaning up the industry, reversing age-old bad practices in this market. To me, theirs was partly a story of the triumph of public relations.





**Bad loan** Jose Palomo, a car salesman in Fontana, CA, had his home foreclosed on when the housing bubble burst.

### Leaving Roanoke

I resigned from the *Roanoke Times* and for most of 2005 was freelancing full-time. I made virtually no money that year, but by working on the Ameriquest story, it helped me move to the next thing. I was hired by *The Wall Street Journal* to cover the bond market. Of course, I came in pitching mortgage-backed securities as a great story. I could have said it with more urgency in the proposal, but I didn't want to come off as an advocate.

Daily bond-market coverage is their bread and butter, and I tried to do the best I could on it. I was doing what I could for the team but I was not playing in a position where my talents and my skills were being used to the highest. I felt like I had a lot of information that needed to be told, and an understanding that many other reporters didn't have. And I could see a lot of the writing focused on deadbeat borrowers lying about their income, rather than how things were really happening.

Through my reporting I knew two things: that there were a lot of predatory and fraudulent practices throughout the subprime industry. It wasn't isolated pockets, rogue lenders, or rogue employees. It was endemic. And I also knew that Wall Street played a big role in this, and that Wall Street was driving or condoning and/or profiting from a lot of these practices. I understood that, basically, the subprime lenders, like Ameriquest, and even Countrywide, were creatures of Wall Street. Wall Street loaned these companies money; the companies then made loans and off-loaded the loans to Wall Street; Wall Street then sold the loans as securities to investors. It was this magic circle of cash flowing. The one thing I didn't understand was all the fancy financial alchemy—the derivatives, the swaps—that was added on to put the loans on steroids.

It's clear that people inside a company could commit fraud and get away with it, despite a company's best efforts. But I don't think it can happen in a widespread way when a company has basic compliance systems in place. The best way to connect the dots from the sleazy practices on the ground to people at high levels was to say, "Okay, they had these compliance people in place. Did they do their jobs? And if they did, what happened to them?"

In late 2010, at the Center for Public Integrity, I got a tip about a whistleblower case involving someone who worked at a high level at Countrywide. This is Eileen Foster, who had been an executive vice president, the top fraud investigator. She was claiming before OSHA that she was fired for reporting widespread fraud, but also for trying to protect other whistleblowers within the company who were reporting fraud at the branch and regional levels. The interesting thing is that no one in the government had ever contacted her! In September 2011, this became, "Countrywide Protected Fraudsters by Silencing Whistleblowers, say Former Employees," one of CPI's best-read stories of the year; *60 Minutes* followed with its own interview of Foster, in a segment called, "Prosecuting Wall Street." It was very exciting.

There needs to be more investigative reporting of problems that are going on now, rather than post-mortems about financial disasters or crashes or bankruptcies that have already happened. And that's hard to do. It takes a real commitment from a news organization, because you're working on these stories for a long time, and market players you're writing about do some real pushback. But there needs to be more of this early-warning journalism. **CJR**

# Postage due

*The USPS is running out of money.  
Where does that leave magazines?*

BY LAUREN KIRCHNER

Early on a February morning, in a glass-walled conference room high up in the Hearst Tower in Manhattan, Postmaster General Patrick Donahoe spoke in a careful, reassuring tone. "We can do this; I *know* that we can do this," he told the audience, which included representatives from magazine-industry heavyweights like Condé Nast, Hearst, and Time Inc. "Hang in there with us." ¶ Donahoe's talk was a keynote at a "Postal Summit"

organized by The Association of Magazine Media (MPA, formerly the Magazine Publishers of America) to address the inarguably dire situation currently facing the United States Postal Service, and the complications that situation is causing for the businesses that depend on its survival.

Despite Donahoe's assurances, his audience couldn't be blamed for being skeptical. In the past decade, the postal service has been hit by a perfect storm of technological and cultural shifts, economic recession, and political gridlock. Since 2000, the USPS has seen a precipitous decline in the volume of mail. From 2006 to 2011, as people have increasingly sent e-mails instead of letters and paid bills online, first-class mail volume has dropped 25 percent. As the housing and financial sectors sank, so did the amount of direct mail they sent to prospective customers. The country's second-largest civilian employer (after Walmart), the USPS has been squeezed by rising health-care costs for its half-million employees, plus the requirement to pre-fund their pensions.

While the service has often run a deficit during its 237-year history, it now faces the possibility of insolvency. Following a loss of \$5.1 billion in fiscal year 2011, the service reported a \$3.3 billion loss in the first quarter of fiscal 2012 alone—a

period that's typically the most profitable of the year because of mail sent in the winter holiday season. The USPS's total deficit as of last December was already \$12.9 billion, and in February, the agency projected that it may run out of cash completely by October.

All of this is alarming news for the magazine industry, which, despite its recent forays into digital publishing, still depends on the postal service to deliver almost 90 percent of its circulation. Some publishers at the summit wondered aloud just how worried they should be. What would happen if the USPS actually shut down?

"THE ONE THING I WILL NOT DO IS CRY wolf," said Donahoe as he wrapped up his speech. "I will not say 'We're not going to deliver mail.' ... If I say that, you will say, 'I need some alternative solution.' And once you go to that alternative solution, we may never get you back. So that's not going to happen."

The magazine industry's fate and that of the USPS have always been inextricably linked. Since the very beginning of the postal service in 1775, periodicals have enjoyed an extremely favorable shipping rate, an agreement rooted in the Founding Fathers' conviction that the spread of information and opinion across the country was vital to democracy. "Magazines and newspapers

accounted for nearly all of the weight of the mail in the first half of the 19th century—as much as 80 to 95 percent—and they only paid five to 15 percent of the revenue," said Richard R. John, a historian of communications at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. "And that was almost never a controversial issue."

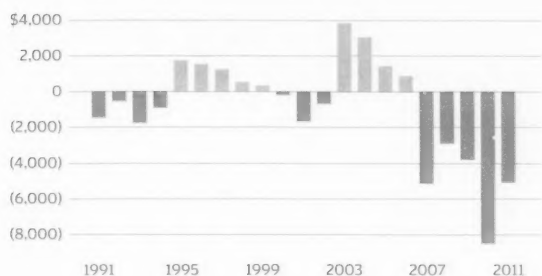
The postal service, meanwhile, needs to keep magazines in the mail. As mail volume decreases, Donahoe explained in his keynote, advertising (a.k.a. junk mail) becomes an ever-larger portion of it; magazines keep people coming back to their mailboxes, which in turn keeps the postal service in business. "They need us as much as we need them," agreed James Cregan, executive vice president of government affairs for the MPA.

Both Donahoe and Cregan said that it is unlikely that the preferential pricing scheme for periodicals will end, though some above-inflation price hikes are possible as the postal service tries to quickly reduce its debt. What is perhaps more of an immediate concern, though, is the impact of worsening service.

Magazine publishers say that they're already dealing with complaints from customers about lost, damaged, and late magazines, and that the latest USPS proposal to regain solvency could worsen the problem with even more staff cuts, fewer

## USPS net income and loss 1991–2011

millions of dollars



processing centers, and an end to Saturday delivery. The USPS says ending six-day delivery would save \$2.7 billion annually by 2016, and network consolidation would save \$4.1 billion. But even so, some of those changes would have to be approved by Congress; as of this writing, lawmakers were struggling to intervene before the May 15 expiration of a moratorium on closing post offices and processing centers. (Voting to shut down your own districts' facilities is tantamount to political suicide—almost sure to become a re-election campaign issue.)

Meanwhile, publishers must decide how to deal with slower and less-consistent delivery. William Falk, editor-in-chief of *The Week* magazine, took the bold step of printing an editor's letter addressing the problem in his February 3 issue. Of the magazine's 535,000 subscribers, about 100,000 of them got a letter, in zip codes with the most complaints. In the note, Falk placed the blame for late deliveries directly on the postal service. "*The Week* magazine prints every Wednesday night at exactly the same time—every week, without fail," the letter read. "We then pay a very substantial fee to have copies trucked to 70 postal distribution facilities around the country every Thursday morning. This is an investment *The Week* has made in order to speed delivery of your copy to a postal facility in your area." According to the USPS's delivery standards, the letter continued, readers should expect to receive their copies on Friday or Saturday, but that, "to our dismay, that consistent delivery has eroded..."

In an interview, Falk explained that he had heard from readers who, after getting their copies of *The Week* on Friday or Saturday for years, were now getting it on Monday or Tuesday, or even later. For a weekly magazine, one specifically designed to summarize and contextualize the previous week's news, that delay makes a huge difference to the magazine's relevance. "Saturday really is a good day for us to arrive for people, because we have cultural content that helps them plan their weekend... and it's the chance to look back at the week that's just occurred," said Falk. "We don't really know what we'll do if they end Saturday delivery—we've talked about it, but we haven't made a decision yet."

One solution that some publishers at the summit said they were considering is to move their editorial deadline forward, to accommodate earlier postal service deadlines and slower, less-reliable delivery. The drawback to this option is obvious: Now that print magazines are competing for readers' atten-

tion with constantly updated online content, adding more lead time to their delivery seems risky. Closing issues earlier also complicates transactions with advertisers, who like to be able to tinker with copy and placement until the last minute.

Another solution—one heavily discussed at the MPA event, which was sponsored in part by several alternative delivery services—is to opt out of the USPS and go for private delivery. *Women's Wear Daily*, a time-sensitive fashion trade paper owned by Condé Nast, already offers hand delivery to its readers in New York City. But for other types of magazines, and readers in less densely populated parts of the country, alternate delivery services can be prohibitively expensive. Publishers at the summit also said they felt their subscribers wanted to get their magazines in their mailboxes, rather than tossed at the end of the driveway like a newspaper. By law, only the USPS can put mail in mailboxes.

Then there is digital delivery. Readers are already accustomed to going online for both short- and long-form magazine content, and sales of tablets and e-readers are soaring. Many magazines already sell PDF versions of their print issues to read on Kindles, Nooks, and iPads (Zinio, the largest service of its kind, currently has 5,500 clients, including CJR). More and more magazines are experimenting with digital sales through the Amazon Marketplace and Apple's Newsstand. Why not stop delivering altogether?

The answer is that, for all their digital experimentation, magazines are nowhere near ready to abandon print. Online ads still bring in a fraction of the revenue print ads do, apps are still in the early stages of monetization, and digital-download versions are still a relatively small proportion of revenue. Magazine readers aren't yet ready to lose their print copies, either. A 2010 study by the CMO Council found that 87 percent of people interested in reading magazines on tablets or e-readers still wanted a printed copy to accompany it; another survey conducted by the Harrison Group on behalf of Zinio and MEMS Technology showed that 75 percent of readers felt that digital content complements print content, and only 25 percent felt that digital could replace print.

True, those attitudes will likely shift with time. According to the Audit Bureau of Circulations (ABC), which has allowed for digital editions in its audits since 2002, the number of magazines that request audits of their digital editions increased fourfold from 2007 to 2011, and about a third of the magazines the bureau audits now do so. But as of 2011, digital subscriptions still account for less than 1 percent of total circulation for all US magazines, according to the ABC.

In the absence of any clear short-term solutions, what's a publisher to do? Stick with the USPS but move up the editorial schedule to accommodate slower service, making the content less current? Switch to an alternate delivery service, which would be more expensive? Or push readers to go digital even faster? No option is perfect, but they're all on the table.

"The whole industry is talking about everything," said William Falk of *The Week*. "There is a sea change going on, and none of us know quite how it's going to shake out." **CJR**

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# Six degrees of aggregation

*How The Huffington Post ate the Internet*

BY MICHAEL SHAPIRO

Of the many and conflicting stories about how The Huffington Post came to be—how it boasts 68 sections, three international editions (with more to come), 1.2 billion monthly page views and 54 million comments in the past year alone, how it came to surpass the traffic of virtually all the nation's established news organizations and amass content so voluminous that a visit to the website feels like a trip to a mall where the exits are impossible

to locate—the earliest and arguably most telling begins with a lunch in March 2003 at which the idea of an online newspaper filled with celebrity bloggers and virally disseminated aggregated content did not come up.

The invitation for the lunch came from Kenneth Lerer. He was 51 and casting about for something new, having recently left his position as executive vice president for communications at AOL. Lerer was a private man who was nonetheless comfortable in the presence of powerful people with whom he had earned a reputation for honing images in disrepair, most famously for the disgraced and subsequently rehabilitated junk bond trader Michael Milken. Lerer had made a good deal of money and a good many friends after having first made a name for himself in the quixotic 1974 New York senate campaign of Ramsey Clark (for which he was hired by the chairman of this magazine, Victor Navasky, who later recruited him for CJR's Board of Overseers, which has no say

in content). Lerer was splitting his time between New York and skiing at his vacation home in Utah when he came across a new book by a young sociologist, Duncan Watts. The book was called *Six Degrees*. Lerer was so taken by it that he took Watts to lunch.

He brought the book with him and Watts would recall that the copy was dog-eared, the flatteringly telltale sign of a purposeful read. Lerer had a plan and he wanted Watts to help him. He had set himself an ambitious target. He wanted to take on the National Rifle Association. He told Watts: "I know the answer to this is somewhere in these pages."

Nine years and one Pulitzer Prize later, what is the phenomenon that lunch set in motion? How is it that The Huffington Post, at turns celebrated as the savior of its parent company and decried as a glitzy thief of journalism produced by others, has come to matter?

Before its purchase by AOL in February 2011, HuffPost







**Crowd sorceress** Arianna Huffington poses in the original HuffPost newsroom in Soho, 2009.

was not a property that had produced much in the way of revenue; it had posted a profit only in the year before the sale—the amount has never been disclosed—on a modest \$30 million in revenue. Aside from scoops from its estimable Washington bureau, it did little in the way of breaking stories, the industry's traditional pathway to recognition.

The Huffington Post, which had mastered search-engine optimization and was quick to understand and pounce on the rise of social media, had been at once widely followed but not nearly so widely cited. But that is likely to change now that it can boast of a Pulitzer Prize for national reporting—the rebuttal to every critic who dismissed HuffPost as an abasement of all that was journalistically sacred.

Arianna Huffington liked to say that the site that bore her name had remained true to its origins. The homepage's "splash" headline still reflected a left-of-center perspective; it had thousands of bloggers, famous and not, none of them

paid; and while there was ever more original content, especially on the politics and business pages, the site was populated overwhelmingly with content that had originated elsewhere, much of it from the wires (in fairness, an approach long practiced by many of the nation's newspapers). But Huffington Post had evolved into something more than the Web's beast of traffic, blogging, and aggregation. These days, Arianna Huffington has a regular seat at the politics roundtable, which speaks not only to her own facility on TV but also to the prominence her organization enjoys.

Power can be felt, even if it defies measurement. By the winter of 2012, Huffington Post could lay claim to a widely shared perception of its growing influence—the word Huffington prefers to power, which, she says, sounds "too loaded." For better or, in the eyes of its critics, worse, Huffington Post had assumed the position of a media institution of consequence.

It was possible to draw all sorts of conclusions from data about "HuffPo," both flattering and not. Yet two numbers in particular stood out for what they suggested about the nature of the enterprise that Huffington, Jonah Peretti, and the host of that first lunch, Ken Lerer, had built: 40 million and 19,000. The former is the number of unique visitors who came to the site in January. The latter is the number of names in Arianna Huffington's contact list.

Each represents a network that together constituted something far greater than what each represented by itself—an aspiration: the potential power that comes to those who can build, nurture, and harness a network that is at once vast and loyal.

Emphasis on potential.

### 1. Connected

Duncan Watts, an Australian who had come to Cornell for graduate school, was 32 and possessed a disposition that could be mistaken for curmudgeonly. The rapid growth of the Web had proven a boom time for social scientists, who could suddenly perform all sorts of research on large samples in very quick time and at relatively little cost. The result was papers and conferences and books that, in Watts' view, transformed sociologists into engineers. Time and again, people approached Watts with questions for which he could offer only the maddening answer of "it depends." This did nothing to make sociologists popular. Nor did it stop all sorts of people from coming around, among them Ken Lerer.

*Six Degrees* examined the nature of what Watts called "small worlds." The conceit—later to be adopted by fans of Kevin Bacon and playwright John Guare—had come from a 1967 experiment by the social psychologist Stanley Milgram, in which he tracked the number of connections it would take for a letter to reach a certain recipient unknown to the original sender. The answer: six. That conclusion suggested that it was possible for any one person to reach any other person in the world by establishing a network of diminishing familiarity—start with a friend, then a friend of a friend, and so on—until the connection was complete. That premise had fueled the study of what Watts called the "science of networks," one that dated to the 18th century and which had over time drawn in a host of scientists who seemed to think all things could be measured. And if they could be measured, they might be graphed and charted in a way that revealed patterns that could, in an ideal world, be replicated.

Perhaps the dream of creating vast networks of connected strangers was possible, if only one could identify the proper links. Or, in the parlance of the network world, making weak links into strong ones.

Watts's book was filled with images and drawings that could be confounding—how many threads are necessary for connecting a mass of buttons in a way that created a button network?—yet tantalizing, especially, it seemed, for someone trying to find a way to take on one of the nation's most powerful lobbies.

Still, networks were eternally undermined by the inevitable force of randomness. It was one thing, say, to go to a

**Says Peretti of going viral: 'Part of it feels like magic—I just did this little thing and a big thing happened.'**

baseball game and hear the stirrings of rhythmic clapping that then cascade around the ballpark so that quickly everyone is clapping in unison. A powerful thing to behold—so much so that an inning later, you yourself might want to start the whole stadium clapping. Maybe the person to your left joins in, and maybe five or six others do, too. Until the clapping dies. In Watts's view, networks were a wonderful phenomenon to observe, but all but impossible to replicate. Why did everyone in the ballpark feel the desire to join in the clapping in the sixth inning but not in the seventh? What was different? Could you somehow recreate the precise conditions that made that ephemeral but resoundingly successful sixth-inning network happen?

Watts doubted it. There were simply too many variables at work. Still, you could, in theory, try something: Start to clap, see if anyone joins in, stop if they don't, wait for a new set of conditions to arise—another player to bat, a runner reaches second base? Or third? In other words, experiment, and measure the results as they occur, all the while adjusting, tweaking—try clapping louder, say, then faster, maybe adding a chant—but do so having accepted the likelihood that animates work for all scientists: failure.

Ken Lerer listened, and he was not deterred. Networks did, in fact, occur—vast networks through which previously disconnected people suddenly found themselves joined together, perhaps to share an idea, a song, a sentiment, a cause. Why not then try to create a network that could challenge the vast and powerful and sustaining network of the NRA?

"I know the answers," Watts told him. "I am confident they are not there." Then, having deflated Lerer, Watts threw him a lifeline: "Maybe my friend Jonah can help you."

JONAH PERETTI WAS 29 AND HAD ALREADY EARNED A REPUTATION as something of a wise guy. He had been a technology teacher at a New Orleans private school when he was admitted to a graduate program at MIT. His plan was to study ways networks might foster communication among teachers, but he got sidetracked midway through his master's thesis. In 2000, Nike was inviting customers to create footwear with personalized wording. The company had been criticized widely for selling sneakers made by desperately poor people in impoverished countries. Peretti, tall, skinny and bespectacled, submitted his request: He wanted his sneakers emblazoned with the word SWEATSHOP. Nike declined. At which point, Peretti did a clever thing: he e-mailed.

Nike replied. Back and forth they went: Peretti pressing

his request; Nike, grasping at excuses, going so far as to refuse on the grounds that “sweatshop” was slang and therefore not permissible. Peretti, citing Webster’s, insisted it was not. He ended the exchange with a final request: “Could you please send me a color snapshot of the 10-year-old Vietnamese girl who makes my shoes?” What happened next represents one of those moments in which the tectonic media plates experienced a subtle but profound shift: Peretti offered the e-mail trail to *Harper’s*. The magazine declined. So, on January 17, 2001, Peretti forwarded the e-mails to 10 friends. Those friends, in turn, forwarded the e-mails to other friends and before long, a lot of people who had never heard of Jonah Peretti—some of them in Australia—were sending around his e-mail conversations with Nike.

Less than two weeks after he first forwarded the e-mails, the *San Jose Mercury News* published a story about the exchange. *Salon* soon followed. Then *Time*, *The Village Voice*, and *The Independent* and *The Guardian* in London. Years later, Peretti would recall the sensation of watching something he had originated spread so widely that it would culminate in his appearance on the *Today Show* with a chagrined representative of Nike. “Every person who’s made something that’s gone viral remembers the experience with glee and disbelief,” he says. “Part of it feels powerful and part of it feels like magic—I just did this little thing and a big thing happened.”

To his credit, Peretti completed his thesis on teacher communication, but his mind was elsewhere, looking for ways to replicate the sensation he had experienced with Nike. He left Cambridge and moved to New York, where he started a laboratory for what he called “contagious media.” At Eyebeam Art & Technology Center, Peretti, together with like-minded friends including his sister, Chelsea, an aspiring stand-up comic, produced what would come to be regarded as early independent benchmarks of virality: *blackpeopleloveus.com*—in which white people try to ingratiate themselves with black friends in a manner so compellingly offensive that it earned a piece in *The New York Times*; and the “breakup hotline,” a telephone number and accompanying website for women attempting to rid themselves of unwanted suitors. “I was trying to have an impact on culture,” Peretti says.

Where Watts believed in “embracing” randomness, Peretti nodded to it but had seen that he possessed a talent for improving the odds of a viral launch. Watts would later say, “Basically, he’s a prankster.”

Which was why he thought Peretti and Lerer should meet.

STOPTHENRA.COM DID NOT, IN THE END, STOP THE NRA. The goal was to ensure that the Clinton-era assault-weapon ban would not expire in September 2004. And though the ban did end—Congress simply avoided voting on it—Lerer would remain pleased with the effort. (Later that year he donated the site to the Jim Brady gun-control campaign.) For Peretti, the experience provided important lessons. He had learned through the Nike saga how essential a role mainstream media played in adding legitimacy to a viral meme, a lesson underscored by Lerer’s PR skill. But there was something more, a point that Watts had raised early in his book.



**Whale of an idea** Jonah Peretti is also boss of BuzzFeed.

The problem with Stop the NRA was that it spoke to an audience that was, in Watts’s words, already “clustered.” That audience was akin to a group of friends or colleagues who already knew one another. As an example of “clustering,” Watts cited a science-fiction trilogy by Isaac Asimov, in which Earth is a land of atomized steel caves, as opposed to Solaria, where all communication is virtual. On Earth, everyone whom everyone knows is known intimately, but they do not know anyone else. On Solaria, the connections are vast, but weak.

It is almost too convenient to read that passage and, given the state of the news business in 2003, not think of newspapers as the equivalent of all those steel caves, sealed off and closely bound. In the two generations since the great migration of readers from the cities to the suburbs, the prevailing wisdom in newsrooms was that readers, having abandoned the outward view of the street for the inward view of the backyard, cared only about what was taking place in closest proximity. To work in a newsroom with a strong suburban readership was to be told, time and again, that the metric for success was market penetration, and that looking outward beyond geographical limits of the circulation area was a kind of journalistic heresy. Meanwhile, a whole new way of disseminating information was exploding—sending stories and news into those heretofore seemingly impregnable caves, and ending the monopolies on content. Readers may have still wanted their newspapers, but they no longer needed them as they once had.

The alternative to the steel caves, to the “clusters,” was the ephemeral network of Solaria. But where, in the here and now, did that network exist? How could it be harnessed? Peretti, whose stock in trade was the dissemination of pieces of disconnected content, believed he had an answer: He called it the Bored At Work Network. All across the world,



**I know you are, but what am I?** Co-founders Ken Lerer and Arianna Huffington hosted HuffPost's 2010 Game Changers event.

he believed, men and women sat at their desks, staring at computer screens, bored senseless. How better to provide a momentary relief from the tedium than to disseminate something so engagingly simple that recipients would take a moment to forward it to friends? (Rule No. 1 of the Peretti School of Viral Content: It must be explainable in a sentence.)

What was forwarded, of course, reflected something about the sender, which, as Watts pointed out, was why few ever send pornography—not cool. And while a good deal of these bits of content had all the permanence of footprints in sand, every so often the Bored At Work Network would light up, and weak links were instantly transformed into strong ones. A vast network sprang to life.

"It's hard to reproduce," Peretti would later say. "It's hard to understand." But when it happened, its power was palpable.

WHICH WAS WHY LERER REMAINED UNDETERRED. THE 2004 presidential campaign had begun, and for Democrats there was the growing sense that President Bush, saddled by the increasingly unpopular war in Iraq, could be defeated. Peretti was still experimenting with contagious projects and teaching at NYU's Interactive Telecommunications Program (ITP) when Lerer called with an idea: He wanted Peretti to fly to Los Angeles to meet Arianna Huffington.

Lerer had met her that year, at a dinner on the Upper East Side. His wife had declined the invitation and Lerer went reluctantly, only to find himself succumbing to the charm that had worked so well for so long on so many people. Lerer

thought it might be a good idea for Huffington to meet his young collaborator. At that moment, Peretti represented that small sliver of American society who had no idea who Lerer was talking about.

In the fall of 2004, Arianna Huffington was well along in yet another iteration of what her many critics and perhaps even some of her many friends might call the Saga of Arianna.

Very long story short: Huffington, née Stassinopoulos, child of a Greek newspaper owner of inconsistent success, escapes a relatively friendless adolescence in Athens for England, where in short order she joins and becomes a featured member of the Cambridge debating Union and thereby a) discovers the power of words b) meets lots of people and, as a result, c) starts to appear on television d) writes a best-selling book on feminism and e) meets and falls in love with the cultural critic Bernard Levin who, she jokes, in what becomes a familiar refrain, is twice her age and half her size. (She is 5'10".) She breaks off with Levin after seven years; she wants children, he does not. She writes two more books (the second, a biography of Maria Callas, results in a plagiarism suit that ends in a settlement with an author she would later consider a friend) and relocates to New York, where, with the help of such social luminaries as Ann Getty and Barbara Walters becomes so ubiquitous a fixture on the Upper East Side party circuit that in 1983 she is anointed with a profile in *New York* magazine: "The Rise and Rise of Arianna Stassinopoulos." Three years later, she marries, seemingly well, the Texas gas and oil heir Michael Huffington, a Republican whose political career she helps guide through his election to Congress in 1992. Then comes Huffington's unsuccessful 1994 run for the Senate, during which the glowing picture of Arianna as the eager young woman about town devolves into a portrait so calculating that she calls to mind Angela Lansbury in *The Manchurian Candidate*. The marriage ends in 1997—Michael Huffington later reveals that he is bisexual—leaving Arianna with a house in Brentwood she shares with her sister and two daughters, and with a lingering reputation as a woman of somewhat curious opinions on alternative lifestyles and healthy living (she is a fiend about sleep), fueled by her association with one John-Roger, the leader of the cultlike Movement of Spiritual Inner Awareness. Arianna, contributor to the *National Review*, evolves into a "progressive." She runs for governor. She gets less than 1 percent of the vote. She returns to writing books—there will be 13 in all—as well as a blog, Ariannaonline, when one morning in the fall of 2004, Jonah Peretti, who had flown in the night before and who had spent the night in the guest room, comes into the dining room at 7 a.m. to discover that he is her second breakfast meeting of the day.

Laurie David, then-wife of the dyspeptic Larry, soon joins them, and Peretti is whisked along on a private jet for a flight to Sacramento for a rally in support of the Senate candidacy of Phil Angelides. In the course of a few hours, Peretti would watch with wonderment as Arianna Huffington eased herself from setting to setting, all the while making the person she was talking with feel like the most interesting and important person in the world, hanging on every word, never shifting her attention to check one of three BlackBerries. "I love being



## Lerer found himself succumbing to the charm that had worked so well for so long on so many people.

a gatherer," Huffington would later say. "I don't really think you can make gathering mistakes."

Peretti saw this talent through a different prism. "Arianna," he says, "can make weak ties into strong ties."

He returned to New York to discover that Lerer was already a few steps ahead of him. He wanted to talk about the venture the three of them would embark upon. "I remember him saying things like, 'We don't want to build a big website,'" Peretti would recall. "We want to build an *influential* site."

### 2. Sticky

Precisely what occurred at the Huffington home in Brentwood a few weeks later, after George W. Bush's defeat of John Kerry in 2004, is open to both debate and litigation. The nature of the dispute has to do with who exactly came up with the idea for what would become Huffington Post. All sorts of well-connected people—all connected to Arianna—had all sorts of ideas about how people of fame and influence on the left could make that influence felt. Among the 30 or so people invited—Larry David, Norman Lear, Meg Ryan, David Geffen—was one conservative outlier, Matt Drudge's associate, the late Andrew Breitbart, who would later tell *Wired* that the site was *his* idea all along. Two other participants, Democratic consultants Peter Daou and James Boyce, would insist that the idea was theirs, and would six years later sue Huffington and Lerer. The case is pending.

Still, the sense of those assembled was that the left needed an answer to the power of Matt Drudge—the secretive, right-leaning loner who had become the political world's primary purveyor of content and opinion—and that perhaps Arianna's many friends could help. People offered suggestions about how this might work. Lerer, as was his habit, said almost nothing; he had long cultivated the reputation of a canny strategist by being a good listener who waited until everyone else had their say before offering a trenchant opinion. Yet there was one constant in the comments: how to make best use of the growing fascination with blogging.

The phenomenon had with remarkable speed spawned a culture whose chief practitioners celebrated the end of the traditional way information flowed: top to bottom. No longer, the blogging champions claimed, would the power to disseminate ideas reside with the legacy news organizations. The Web had made everyone a publisher—even, it was repeated endlessly, the fellow who stayed in his pajamas all day.

Back in New York, Peretti reasoned that to try to replicate Drudge by being like Drudge would do no good. Those who

had tried—Drudge Retort, BuzzFlash—had gained little traction. "You could be 50 percent better but it wouldn't matter," he later said. "No one would need it." Drudge already owned the franchise on what Peretti called "stickiness"—the capacity to have readers return, time and again.

While Drudge was sticky, so too were the bloggers, many of whom presented ideas that could be shared and, as a result, created communities among like-minded people, clusters. Watts's clusters, while tightly knit, tended to grow slowly. Peretti wanted to grow fast.

He had already seen how effectively he could spread content. But the networks he created did not last. Arianna Huffington's networks did. He had watched her move between networks she had created—no one, he believed, worked harder at it—all the while connecting people in a way that made them feel a part of something. It was not merely making weak ties into strong ones: "She makes her weak ties *feel* like strong ties." And that, he recognized, "creates a large network of all kinds of people who feel close to you. That's really important for power."

To succeed, he concluded, the site that was to become Huffington Post would have to be both viral *and* sticky. People would have to feel a connection that brought them back. They would also need to have things they could share with other people. And what better way to take fullest advantage of the blogging boom than to have *famous* people do it? The blogging world might well hate it, but "they wouldn't be able not to look," he later said. "Even the haters would come every day."

If the site was to be a blog, it had to look like a blog, and for that he would need to build it with blogging software. He chose Moveable Type and set about building a prototype. It was up to Lerer to raise the seed money—\$1 million. And it was up to Huffington to find the bloggers. She wanted Arthur Schlesinger; he was a friend. So was Larry David. And John Cusack. And Harry Shearer.

Who wasn't?

### 3. Contagious

Eyebeam's "Contagious Media Showdown" began on Saturday, May 7, 2005, with a series of workshops and the launch of a contest, whose winners would be judged, fittingly, not on the aesthetics of their viral creations but on the metrics: hits, page views, unique visits, unique users, bandwidth, etc.

Submissions included cryingwhileeating.com, thebrainfreeze.com, fartingsaucers.com, and the eventual winner, forgetmenotpants—615,562 *unique visitors!* Jonah Peretti was the kickoff speaker. Four years had passed since he hit the send button on his Nike campaign, and in that time, he had helped spawn a phenomenon that had developed a culture all its own and was moving beyond its underground roots. MSNBC, Slate, and the *Los Angeles Times* covered the event with the sort of tender wonder associated with seeing a child's first drawing.

Huffington Post's debut came two days later, and the reaction to it was decidedly less enthusiastic. The site was not handsome. But to its founders, that was beside the point.

Peretti, who like Huffington and Lerer was unencumbered by journalistic sensibilities, understood that all that really mattered was ease of use. Except for the “splash” headline and the tile architecture that the site would soon adopt, the HuffPost of May 2005 looked like a stripped-down version of today’s.

The launch featured an introductory blog by Huffington herself, along with blogs by, yes, Arthur Schlesinger, Larry David, and a much-maligned co-bylined post by Julia Louis-Dreyfus and her husband, Brad Hall, on gay marriage. The knives were out: “I’m predicting it’ll be at least as successful as Arianna’s last campaign for governor, and you can quote me on that,” wrote Ned Rice in *National Review Online*. “The problem with blogs like The Huffington Post is that they divert our attention from real and serious journalism,” wrote Cal Thomas of *Tribune Media Services*, which had been carrying *ariannaonline.com*. But no one could rival the delighted venom of Nikki Finke in *LA Weekly*: “Judging from Monday’s horrific debut of the humongously pre-hyped celebrity blog the Huffington Post, the Madonna of the mediapolitic world has undergone one reinvention too many.” Finke went on to hit where it seemed likely to hurt most, suggesting that Huffington’s Hollywood friends wanted little to do with the venture.

In truth, there was little need to scrounge for copy; all sorts of people were willing to have a turn once they realized how easy it was to send along their musings. There was little in the way of editing, save for some cosmetic tending to prose, and the admonition, especially to the writers among them, to “be blogger.”

BY MAY 2006, *TIME* HAD ANOINTED HUFFINGTON ONE OF the world’s 100 most influential people—along with Matt Drudge. Lerer had raised another \$5 million and the site, depending on who was doing the counting, had between 760,000 and 1.3 million monthly unique visitors. Huffington announced the hiring of Melinda Henneberger, a former reporter for *The New York Times* and *Newsweek*, in an effort to create original content generated by a salaried employee. Huffington seemed to be inviting everyone she encountered to blog, including the doctor who had tended to her broken foot. Money was coming in; in June, the JWT advertising agency bought all the site’s advertising space for a single week to promote such clients as JetBlue, Levi’s, and Ford, at a cost reportedly in the low six figures. *Newsweek* included Arianna on its cover for its story on women and power.

And yet there remained something unseemly about the whole enterprise, especially to journalists, a sense that in making its own rules, Huffington Post had violated a few too many. Its newsgathering was done by others, even if the commentary was original. The bloggers were not paid, a fact that did not stop people from joining in—me included. I wrote 14 blog posts for Huffington Post for one reason only: I had a book coming out, and it was clear that if I wanted to reach potential buyers, HuffPost provided an ever-widening platform. Many writers without marquee names were submitting

pieces and not only seeing them posted, but sometimes surpassing the page views of the famous contributors.

Being able to see their names, or better still, their bylines—with tiny, pinky-nail photos—meant that these unpaid contributors had joined the phenomenon Huffington talked of and celebrated above all others: the Conversation. And in providing all these people with a forum, Huffington Post had succeeded in extending and strengthening the reach of its ever wider, and stickier, network.

That fall, HuffPost traffic surpassed that of *The Philadelphia Inquirer’s* website, though it still lagged behind that of the big players: CNN, Yahoo, the *Times*, and its self-appointed



**Model pupil** Paul Berry took the ball handed him by his former teacher, Peretti, and ran with it.

nemesis, Drudge. The site, which had started with fewer than 10 employees—most in New York, with Huffington and Roy Sekoff in Los Angeles—began to hire, slowly. Among the newcomers was a former student of Peretti’s, Paul Berry. Peretti was getting restless—he was planning to start his own laboratory, a company to be called BuzzFeed—and he needed someone who could transform the already impressive traffic numbers into the metrics worthy of the contagious phenomenon he had helped spawn.

#### 4. Disruptive

By the time he arrived at Huffington Post in 2007, it was as if all of Paul Berry’s life experience had prepared him to become the site’s lord of traffic. He was 30 years old, recently married, and possessed an air of infectious enthusiasm. He spoke in a loud voice. He laughed often, and loudly. Peretti had seen possibilities in him as a graduate student at NYU’s ITP, and invited him to be part of the Contagious Media project at Eyebeam. By then, Berry had long abandoned his youthful dream of writing fiction—he studied Latin American literature as an undergrad—and had found work of moderate fulfillment as a coder and Web developer.

He had spent part of his childhood in Mexico City, where

his father, Tim, worked for UPI before settling in Silicon Valley. Tim, who taught Paul to code when he was eight, eventually founded his own company, which sold downloadable business software, and employed Paul—at least until the dot-com crash of 2000. Paul then headed to Mexico, where he found work as a \$25-an-hour developer, all the while feeling painfully removed from the ferment and excitement of the great digital disruption unfolding at home. “I needed to be close to the change of history,” he recalled. “It’s like there’s an earthquake happening and the land is splitting and there’s this gaping hole. It’s that obvious.”

He returned to New York, where his skills led to work at a real-estate finance firm. But the work did not excite him. Berry enrolled at NYU’s ITP, where he’d taken a class as an undergrad,

‘There is a thrill when someone tells you about something you’ve done without knowing you’ve done it,’ says Berry.

studying with Clay Shirky, the media theorist. To the school’s chagrin, he kept his job and maintained a full class load.

Two weeks before teachers were to submit grades, Berry unveiled *Teachers On the Run*, a site where ITP students could rate and comment on their professors. It became an in-house sensation, especially after one woman posted an anonymous comment criticizing a professor for staring at her breasts. “Everybody was just in a frenzy,” he recalled. Here, after all, was an unnamed student leveling a troubling accusation against a professor in a public forum. Was this slanderous? Was it a grudge? Was it wrong to post? Berry did not think so, especially after more women added their comments, supporting the charge. The school’s administration wanted it shut down, though Shirky stuck up for him. Berry had witnessed, as Peretti had with his Nike campaign, the power an idea could muster if it found its audience.

*Teachers on the Run* was a crude experiment, especially compared to Berry’s project a year later for Peretti’s class: *Dog Island*. Unlike *Teachers on the Run*, *Dog Island* was a hoax, a make-believe resort where dog owners could send their pets, for a respite, or forever. Berry chose a rough look for his first draft. But the sense of the class was that he had not succeeded in making *Dog Island* feel like canine paradise; it needed to be slicker. In Peretti’s class, Berry learned there was a process to creating content with viral capability: iteration. “In Jonah’s approach to viral, there is a structure,” Berry says. “You get close to chaos in how you develop. But there’s a structure of feedback from key people.”

That structure, he was beginning to learn, meant developing an idea, presenting it to an audience, and, depending on their reactions, tweaking, adjusting, even overhauling. “It’s insanely rare that on the first try you have it right.” *Dog*

*Island* did find its audience. There were dog lovers who came to hate it, assuming that sending small pets to *Dog Island* spelled their doom. Berry did not dissuade them, suggesting that, alas, from time to time big dogs did kill little dogs, because that was the natural order of things.

“*Dog Island* was the most fun, because I’m a traffic junkie,” he recalls. “There is a thrill when someone tells you about something you’ve done without knowing you’ve done it.” Something so compelling, alluring, amusing, and so beyond the need for explanation, he adds, “they have to share it.”

Berry had discovered a way to make a living by becoming a creative player in the great disruption. In the culture of “scrappiness,” failure was part of the joy of the work, as he and Peretti found at HuffPost: “Let’s have an idea on Monday. Instead of having a lot of meetings about that idea, let’s just fucking *do* that idea. By Wednesday, we will have realized the flaw in the idea and we’ll have iterated it, so by Friday, it’s totally different, and it’s either executed or almost done.”

And measured. Everything had to be measured. “Traffic,” he says, “was the measure of success. It showed if we could be a real business.”

BUT WHAT, EXACTLY, WAS THAT BUSINESS? BY 2007, HUFFINGTON Post had taken \$10 million in investment. This figure was considered modest by venture-capital standards, but it did suggest, none too subtly, the nature of the enterprise: Raise money, raise the profile, raise more money, and then, when the moment and price were right, look for an exit. That could not happen without revenue, and the revenue would not come without traffic. And traffic, much to his delight, was Paul Berry’s to chase.

In the years to come, much would be made—not all of it kindly—of HuffPost’s success in search engine optimization, or, as its critics insisted, figuring out how to stay a step ahead of the Google search algorithm. “All you had to do was study,” Berry now says. “All you had to do was have compassion for Google’s rules.” And while that may sound too disingenuous by half, there is truth to it. Berry did study, and then he did what he and Peretti had always done: They iterated. Berry launched blogs, stories aggregated from elsewhere, photo slide shows, lists—and measured each of those launches *in real time*, adjusting, pushing as he went. When he and his small New York staff logged off at the end of yet another interminable day, he handed things over to the team of programmers in Ukraine and South America, thereby ensuring that the work, and the measuring, never stopped. With Peretti ever more involved with BuzzFeed, with Huffington in Brentwood, and with Lerer concerning himself primarily with the business, the growing HuffPost newsroom effectively became Berry’s to run.

The space, a loft on lower Broadway above Dean & DeLuca, was a big room with long rows of desks. It was a workplace that approximated the experience of *Lord of the Flies*. In the absence of grown-ups, or any tradition as to how things were supposed to happen, bright and eager people in their 20s spent a lot of time of yelling at one another, all the while competing to see who could drive the most traffic until the end of yet

another 12-hour day, when they would head outside and drink together. "There was a feeling that we were making up the rules as we went along," says one of them. "Most of us had so little work experience that we didn't know it wasn't normal." The absence of criticism represented praise.

People came and went, and when they left, their jobs were filled by someone who might be given a half day of training on Moveable Type and cropping photos before being thrown in the deep end. "There wasn't a lot of guidance on how things were supposed to go," says another former employee, who, like others, asked not to be identified for fear of offending the former employer. Berry was a most approachable boss, especially if someone had an idea about something new that might entice visitors; no one could recall his ever asking for

Retro Bathing Suits" slide show, "Why Women Gladly Date Ugly Men," David Wood's Pulitzer Prize-winning 10-part series on wounded veterans, "Nine Year Old Girl's Twin Found Inside Her Stomach," campaign dispatches from the Off The Bus citizen journalists, "Angelina and Brad Wow at Cannes," and "Multitasking Wilts Your Results and Relationships"—as well as Nico Pitney's blogging on the violence after the disputed 2009 Iranian presidential elections and the 111,000 comments it generated. Because comment was content, too. Comment was like blogging, but at scale. Thousands of comments began to pile up beneath the posts that had generated the commentary. It was as if the posts and blogs were spawning subsidiary posts, the contagious media world's version of a virtuous circle.



**The social networker** Arianna Huffington, interviewed in February at her office in New York, just can't help being a 'gatherer.'

a memo, or saying no. *That slide show might work, give me 20 minutes.* There were new hires who understood, seemingly without explanation, that lists were always done best in odd numbers, because a top 10 list felt like, well, a Top 10 list. Some were not so happy, though, especially those who had come in the naïve hope of creating original works of journalism. They tended to leave, which was just as well, because those who stayed came to see that while a succession of editors took turns addressing the staff about news and content, the speaker who mattered was Berry. He spoke in his animated way about SEO and headlines, why nouns were better search terms than verbs—Michael Jackson *Death*, not Michael Jackson *Dies*. The ethos of the HuffPost newsroom was winning the Google search. "That," says a former employee, "was the thrill."

Not the origination of the content, but the dissemination. Huffington Post, they understood, was not an enterprise whose core purpose was the creation of works of journalism—as significant or mundane as that can be. It was in the *content* business, which created all sorts of possibilities of what it could gather and, with a new headline and assorted tags, send back out, HuffPost's logo affixed. Content would come to mean original reporting by Sam Stein or Ryan Grim from Washington, as well as Alec Baldwin's blog, Robert Reich's rants about the forsaking of the American worker, a "Best

Traffic-counting metrics were at once impossibly complex and elegantly simple: If it's moving, push it; if it's not, change it or bury it. There were also surprises that the nimble HuffPost could leap upon, giving it wins over its competitors. On the afternoon that Heath Ledger died in 2008, for instance, the folks at HuffPost discovered that people were entering not his given first name as a search term, but the more familiar-sounding "Keith." The name Keith was added to the tags, and all that Keith-generated traffic belonged to HuffPost.

Still, there was one caveat to the traffic hunt of which Berry was keenly aware: "The brand still mattered to us." Which meant that there was a limit to the number of best-starlet-nipple slide shows the site could, or should, run. The blogs could not be HuffPost's sole purveyor of depth. Nor could the business continue to grow if it was perceived to be yet another political site. Even as traffic climbed in 2007, there was a sense that HuffPost might face a dramatic drop after the presidential election, then still a year and a half away. Looking ahead, Peretti installed traffic-measurement widgets—and discovered that fully half of the site's traffic came from non-political stories. So in the spring of 2007, HuffPost launched new verticals for media, business, entertainment, and, reflecting Arianna's mission to spread the virtues of health and spirituality, Living Now.

The 2008 presidential election was indeed a bonanza for



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## Nouns were better search terms than verbs— Michael Jackson *Death*, not Michael Jackson *Dies*.

politics sites, HuffPost especially. Four years after the re-election of George W. Bush, a Democrat would be elected president, and Huffington Post had almost twice Drudge's traffic, eclipsing *The Wall Street Journal* and *Los Angeles Times*. By September 2008, the site had become the traffic leader among its competitors, with 4.5 million monthly unique visitors—an increase of 474 percent over the previous September.

A few weeks after the election, Huffington Post announced that it had secured another \$25 million in funding, this time from Oak Investment Partners, whose president, Fredric Harman, joined the HuffPost board. That brought total investment to \$37 million, which had analysts estimating HuffPost's worth at over \$100 million. The company's new CEO, Eric Hippeau, announced that the money would go toward acquisitions and hiring. Within a year, the company added local verticals in several American cities, launched the 23/6 comedy site—with its 2 million monthly uniques—and, perhaps most significant, entered into a news-sharing partnership with Facebook, to be called HuffPost Social News.

Yet there was still enduring criticism of the way HuffPost went about its work, especially from those whose stories were aggregated on HuffPost; over time, those pieces appeared at ever greater length on the site, diminishing the likelihood that readers would follow a link back to the source. Google News was, in comparison, a generous aggregator; it was essentially a headline and first-graph operation. Archival Drudge consisted entirely of links back to the source. HuffPost, on the other hand, was far greedier about holding onto its readers. While it never stopped supplying links, it made them just a little harder to find. It seemed the sharing was to be one-sided.

No wonder there was gloating in media accounts of the 2010 demise of HuffPost's self-congratulatory, yearlong foray into investigative reporting—one that Arianna had proclaimed was launched to "save" that honored, expensive journalistic form. The Investigative Fund's executive editor, Larry Roberts, whom HuffPost had snagged from *The Washington Post*, left after less than a year, and HuffPost's attempts to have the enterprise incorporated as a nonprofit ran into a legal thicket, given that HuffPost itself was a decidedly for-profit venture that, as Gawker took great pleasure in pointing out, was the chief beneficiary of the dispatches the unit produced. The Investigative Unit, along with its funding, ended up being absorbed by its partner, the Center for Public Integrity.

And yet, despite the occasional misstep, the story of Huffington Post began to assume a relentless familiarity: month after month, year after year, the metrics moved in only one

enviable, and northerly, direction. More and more verticals appeared—Style, Technology, Green, Sports, College, Books. HuffPost readers, comScore reported in 2008, were younger than those of Politico and Drudge. And when, in the fall of 2009, HuffPost's 10 million monthly unique visits hurtled it past *The Washington Post*'s traffic, Hippeau took note, in an interview with paidContent.com.

"We are now," he said, "in the big leagues."

### 5. Voracious

A week shy of the first anniversary of their February 2011 union, Arianna Huffington and Tim Armstrong arrived at an already crowded television studio at AOL's lower Manhattan offices for yet another display of their capacity to command attention.

The ostensible reason was the formal announcement of the latest in a series of ventures undertaken by the Huffington Post Media Group, now a property of Armstrong's AOL: 12 hours a day, five days a week of live video streaming. The press corps nibbled on lamb crostini with rosemary aioli while several staff Huffington had poached from the *Times* joined her in working the room.

The gathering was called to order. Armstrong spoke first. He recalled the first time he had met Huffington, in November of 2010, and how that led, many months later, to halftime at the 2011 Super Bowl, when AOL announced that it had agreed to pay \$315 million in what was widely regarded as a desperate move to salvage its declining fortunes by buying Huffington Post and handing control of its editorial operation to Huffington herself. "We believe that content is king," he said. "We also believe that brand is king."

With that he yielded the floor to Arianna Huffington.

Huffington Post, she said, had evolved from "a fast-moving train to a supersonic jet." One hundred and seventy journalists had been hired since the purchase—even as AOL laid off close to 2,500 people and shut down its own journalistic ventures, among them Politics Daily. Even now, she continued, 20 reporters and six editors were at work on what promised to be a 75-part series on the hard times facing the middle class, a potentially dispiriting portrait that would mercifully be offset by HuffPost's "Good News" vertical—MAN RECOVERS WALLET AFTER 35 YEARS!

The video rolled. An actor playing a host brought a reporter from the On Celebrity vertical into a discussion about divorce, while ads rolled across the bottom of the screen and make-believe viewers were invited to join in the discussion via Skype. "We're not creating a new brand," said Roy Sekoff, now the project's director. "We're just doing what Huffington Post already does."

To underscore the point, Huffington offered an example: Imagine a host interviewing Beyoncé. An editor from the newsroom breaks in with word of Defense Secretary Leon Panetta announcing a timetable for withdrawal of American troops from Afghanistan. Perhaps, Huffington suggested, the host might want to ask Beyoncé her thoughts about this news.

"Everything in our universe," she said, "will be featured here."

Tim Armstrong looked on and smiled and let Huffington

do the talking, which made good sense, given that this was now her show. And lest there be any confusion, four large photographs hung in the hallway just outside of the studio: Arianna with Suze Orman, and Arianna with Jamie Oliver, and Arianna with a group of happy young people, and Arianna with Mark Ruffalo and, then, Tim Armstrong.

Armstrong had come to AOL in 2009 after making his name overseeing sales and advertising at Google. He was 43, tall and handsome, the sort of man whom central casting might send over if the part screamed: successful. But at AOL he had inherited a company that, to put it bluntly—and many did—had no discernible reason to exist. AOL had once dominated the online landscape. But that was in the late 1990s, light years away in digital time. Its original core business, dial-up Internet service, was evaporating, even as it moved to transform itself into a content business. Armstrong seemed just the man to accomplish a turnaround; he was also a major investor in Patch, a network of local-news websites that AOL bought after his arrival.

Still, the decline of AOL provided a harsh lesson about corporate lifespans in the digital world. Nineteen years after its IPO and 11 after its \$350 billion market-value merger with Time Warner, AOL was losing 19,000 customers a week.

So eager was AOL to boost its content-driven traffic that in late 2010 it devised a strategy, The AOL Way. Management set markers: Monthly story production rate was to rise from 33,000 to 55,000, video from 4 percent of the content to 70 percent. All staffers were to write between five and 10 stories a day. To help them make those numbers, AOL produced a 60-page handbook filled with graphs, content flow charts, and such exhortations as “Each article should be profitable and generate at least 7k PVs/story.” Editors were to “Identify High-Demand Topics,” and given guidelines for “breaking, seasonal, and evergreen.” Editors were commanded to calculate a story’s “profitability consideration.” “Site leaders” were expected to have on hand no less than eight packages that could produce \$1 million in revenue. One employee anonymously told Business Insider, which broke the story, “AOL is the most fucked-up, bullshit company on earth.”

The AOL Way was, with apologies to Maimondes, “a guide for the perplexed.” The problem was that AOL was neither a legacy news organization, which produced content that people would, in fact, want to read and share, nor did it have the DNA of, say, a Huffington Post.

The Huffington Post, however, was said to be looking for a buyer.

WHEN ARMSTRONG MET ARIANNA HUFFINGTON, HUFFINGTON would later say, they hit it off so famously that by the end of that first meeting, they were finishing each other’s sentences. Two months later, AOL announced the purchase, \$295 million of it in cash. Notably absent from the agreement was a non-compete clause. Ken Lerer left and started his own venture capital firm, Lerer Ventures, which Eric Hippeau soon joined. Peretti left for BuzzFeed. Berry would leave several months later and take up residence across a spacious room from Lerer Ventures—one floor below the

‘It’s not that we want to be the cool dinner party,’ says editor Travis Donovan. ‘We want to be the table itself.’

original Huffington Post newsroom. HuffPost resided in the sleek lower Broadway office of AOL. Of the three founders of the Huffington Post, only Arianna Huffington remained. In a sense, she was just getting started.

She had moved back to New York from Los Angeles in 2010, and had quickly established her presence in the newsroom, to the confusion and occasional chagrin of all those young people who had grown accustomed to a workplace with no discernible adults. HuffPost was by then making big-name hires—Howard Fineman came from *Newsweek* that September. Peter Goodman and Tim O’Brien were hired from the *Times*. The HuffPost Washington bureau, which had begun as a one-person operation and which had celebrated the first time President Obama called on Sam Stein at a press conference, had grown to 26 reporters who, in a city where power is defined by whether calls get returned, now fielded complaints from the offices of both Harry Reid and Mitch McConnell.

By 2012, Huffington Post had grown so big that its critics—and even some of its fans—were beginning to suggest that, if anything, it had gotten *too* big, bloated with so many stories in so many verticals that it was leaving itself vulnerable to new and more nimble content dissemination ventures. Not incidentally, Jonah Peretti’s BuzzFeed claimed 25 million monthly unique visitors in January. HuffPost was also, arguably, encumbered by a parent company that, despite, a late 2011 uptick in advertising revenue—and the reward of a boost in its stock price—had still ended the year with a 3-percent drop in fourth-quarter revenue.

Yet one metric spoke louder than any other about just what it was that Tim Armstrong concluded he was getting when he bought HuffPost: comment. In February, Ryan Grim, the Washington bureau chief, reported on a Houston gathering at which several wealthy men gathered to pool \$100 million to stop the president’s re-election. As good as the scoop was, the response was even more telling: 63,000 comments. It was not unusual for HuffPost stories to generate comment measured in five digits. If, as essayist Paul Ford wrote, the fundamental question animating the Web is “Why wasn’t I consulted?” then Huffington Post could be fairly credited with succeeding at making a great many people feel that, in fact, they were being consulted, and better still, that HuffPost was grateful for their thoughts.

A quarter million comments land in HuffPost’s assorted in-boxes every day. The initial sorting—weeding out spam and offensive “trolls”—is done technologically; in 2010, HuffPost bought Adaptive Semantics, which had created software

for evaluating the "emotional" nature of content, the better to ferret out the most vituperative screeds. But once that screening is done, the work of deciding what to post is left, intentionally, to people who work at HuffPost, as well as to the site's most frequent commenters. In 2010, HuffPost decided to reward its most engaged readers with three "badges" that signify the extent of that engagement: "networkers," who draw fans and followers; "superusers," who share often on Facebook and Twitter and who also comment frequently; and "moderators" who, in recognition of their keen eye and absorption of the site's ethos, are trusted with deleting comments they judge inappropriate.

Taken together, the badgeholders serve as voluntary traffic wardens for what truly makes Huffington Post so valuable to a company like AOL: Not brand. Not content. But *access* to the HuffPost network. It is not just the visit and page-view numbers, because those metrics, envied as they are, inevitably include a vast number of fly-bys, one-time visitors, the long tail of the Bored At Work network. But comments suggest loyalty, and loyalty—or *engagement*, to use the buzzy ad-world term—means an audience that advertisers can, in the ephemeral world of the Web, come close to counting on.

HuffPost, in a sense, has recreated on a grand scale what might be called the Arianna Experience, one that she first learned at Cambridge and which, in the decades since, she has developed into a network of thousands of people of varying degrees of familiarity who are nonetheless connected by virtue of their connection to Arianna. She herself can be somewhat disingenuous about this talent—her mentor as a "gatherer," she likes to say, was her late mother, who would invite all sorts of people to sit at her table, and who always made sure they were fed. When she reminisces about the Cambridge Union, it is not merely the conversation Arianna speaks of, but rather the experience of a young woman with a Greek accent making a name for herself in that most hide-bound British institution by cultivating the power of her words. With words came friends, and with friends came an ever-wider circle of acquaintances, and it did not much matter what they thought or where they lived, because Arianna was not one to "cluster" her associations. Everyone was potentially welcome because—who knew?—some day, they might be worth calling. When Howard Fineman first met her in 1995, she was married to Michael Huffington and hosting salons in their Washington home, where she gathered such one-time kindred spirits as William Bennett, the conservative author and critic, to talk about non-governmental answers to social issues. She and Fineman did not lose touch. He is now HuffPost's editorial director.

"I've never had a bad gathering," she says. "Some of them may have been more boring, less fascinating. But not bad." When she is invited to speak in public, she asks that the house lights be turned up so that she can see the faces in the audience. "If you speak, you know when you have the audience, and you know when you lose them," she says. "I want to see peoples' eyes. I want to connect to them. I want to speak to what I sense they want to hear next."

Tim Armstrong paid a good deal of money in the hope that HuffPost's network might become his, too. And if that is to

happen, his fortunes lie, in large measure, with people like Justin Isaf and Travis Donovan who (with apologies to all those who spend their days producing journalism for HuffPost) are part of the larger army of young men and women charged with the work that is at the core of the enterprise: cultivating, feeding, tending, and stroking the network.

"People will do anything for recognition," says Isaf, who is 28 and a community manager. "When [we] say you're good enough to be recognized by the whole world, that goes a long way. They become loyal to your brand."

Donovan, 25, a senior verticals editor whose arms are ornately tattooed, was a social worker before coming to HuffPost, working to integrate a group home of disabled adults into their community. "It's the exact same thing on social," he says. "We want to change the landscape of media. News is inherently supposed to be social. It's supposed to be something you want to talk with your friends about."

"Once [we] get into someone's network, we spread within that group," says Isaf. "They share it. And we spread within it."

"It's not that we want to be the cool dinner party," Donovan adds. "We want to be the table itself."

An intriguing aspiration, not only for Huffington Post but for every enterprise, existing or still being imagined, that sees in the story of HuffPost's rise a series of replicable steps that assure success. This sort of thinking troubles Duncan Watts. In the end, some things just happen. There is a confluence of events that could not be envisioned, that came together in precisely the right way and at the right time and which, in hindsight, could not have been predicted. "I know that they didn't know they were going to succeed," Watts says of the HuffPost founders. It was not just their complementary skills and temperaments. It was also the moment—the blogging phenomenon, the bitterness of the left after 2004, the coming of Web 2.0 and the excitement of the 2008 election, the rise of the Bored at Work Network, the evolving ease of technology—all of it, all at once. The rhythmic clapping in the sixth inning that, as Watts would put it, cannot necessarily be replicated in the seventh.

"The larger point of this is that we think deterministically," he says. "If you think about the major religions, they're deterministic—creator, plan, faith, destiny, causality. Journalists are prone to this. They tell stories. And stories are confining. There is a tendency to kind of tell a story that makes it seem as if everything had to happen the way it did."

The Huffington Post was supposed to be the left's answer to Drudge. At least that is how the story was framed. HuffPost borrowed from Drudge. And from the bloggers. And from Blackpeopleloveus.com and the Contagious Media Lab and Stop the NRA and Ariannaonline. Then it set about doing what comes so naturally in the digital world, and which the legacy journalistic world still struggles to master: It iterated. It did not try to eliminate the possibility of failure. It did something different. It embraced it. **CJR**

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MICHAEL SHAPIRO, who teaches journalism at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism, is a contributing editor to CJR. To watch a clip of his interview with Arianna Huffington, go to [cjr.org/behind\\_the\\_news/huffvideo.php](http://cjr.org/behind_the_news/huffvideo.php).

# Ideas + Reviews

SECOND READ

## Laboratory confidential

The *Double Helix*'s warts-and-all portrayal of scientific pursuits shook up the formal world of science writing

BY JONATHAN WEINER

When *The Double Helix* appeared in the winter of 1968, I reviewed it for *The Laureate*, the literary magazine at Classical High School, in Providence, Rhode Island. I was a freshman.

It was my first effort as a science writer, and now, after four decades, I feel lucky to have started there. *The Double Helix: A Personal Account of the Discovery of the Structure of DNA*, by James D. Watson, is one of the best books ever written about science, and it happens to have been written by one of the great scientists of the 20th century. And I happened to read it at the very best age—when I still didn't have a clue what I wanted to be.

*The Double Helix* is the story of a race to solve one of the central problems in science, the secret of the gene, which looked to many scientists at mid-20th century like the very heart of life itself. Biologists already knew that genes are the material through which traits are passed from generation to generation—the keys to identity, physiology, evolution. But no one knew the structure of the gene; and until scientists knew that, they couldn't figure out how genes work. Watson went after the problem in the fall of 1951, at the age of 23, when he was still a graduate student, and he scrabbled his way to the solution before he was 25.

In telling the story, he produced a great work of literary nonfiction. Watson expanded the boundaries of science writing to include not only the formal, public face of Nobel-winning discoveries but also the day-to-day life of working scientists—both inside and outside the lab. *The Double Helix* rejuvenated a genre that had been largely academic or hagiographic. Its success showed that there was and is an appetite for the story of science; that the stories can be human and exciting; that scientists can be flawed characters; that the whole endeavor doesn't collapse if you depict it with something less than reverence.

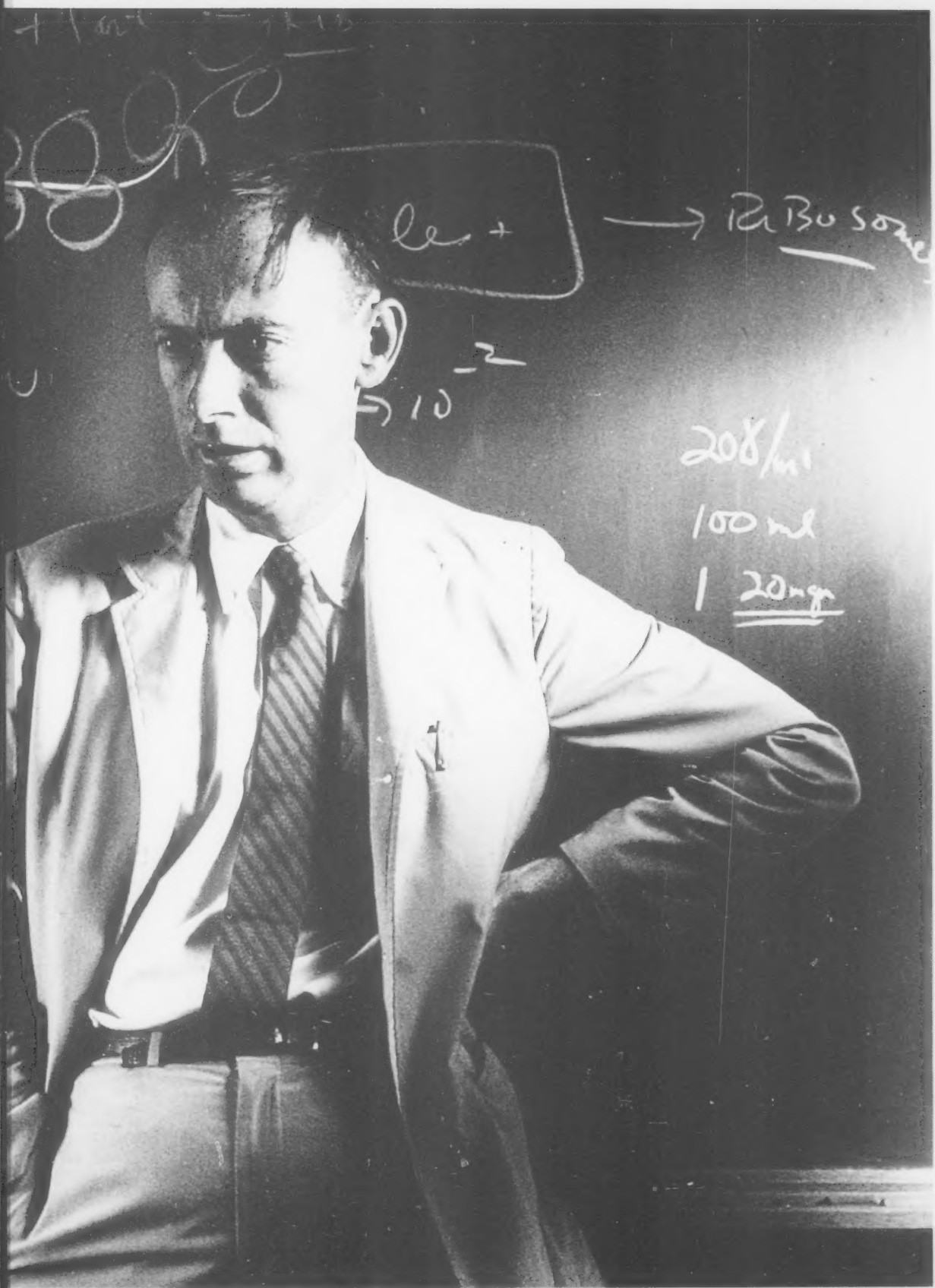
Although the book caused an international scandal that winter, I don't think any word of the controversy reached me at Classical High School. As a freshman, I read *The Double Helix* as a story of pure triumph. Now, of course, I can see what I couldn't then: an epic of the loss of innocence, writ small and large. And I can see the arc of Watson's life since 1968, which has been another epic of triumph and hubris, ending with a fall. So now I see the darkness around the shining cup.

But those are the lessons of life itself.

I HEARD ABOUT *THE DOUBLE HELIX* FROM MY FATHER, A SCIENTIST, WHO couldn't resist reading me the opening scene. He always had a pile of new books on the coffee table, most of them about science. When he picked up *The Double*







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*Helix*, he was struck by the magnitude of the discovery, and by the drama in the book's first few lines. It opens in the Alps, in 1955, two years after Watson and his colleagues have made their breakthrough. Though he is not a mountaineer ("I panic at voids"), Watson has arranged to join a few friends who plan to scale the Rothorn. Hiking up a path at the base of a glacier, he recognizes a climber coming the other way, a biologist named Willy Seeds. "Willy soon spotted me, slowed down, and momentarily gave the impression that he might remove his rucksack and chat for a while. But all he said was, 'How's Honest Jim?' and quickly increasing his pace was soon below me on the path."

These days we sometimes say that a book's DNA can be found in its opening passages. By opening his memoir with the story of that snub, Watson tells his readers exactly how he plans to bring the book to life.

First of all, it will be filled with scenes, and stories. For readers in 1968, that was a surprise in itself. Most of the other science books on Dad's coffee table were reverential biographies of great scientists, aimed at specialists—all plaster busts and technical analysis. That's not the kind of thing Watson promises on his first page. Instead, he intends to reveal the behind-the-headlines story of the race, because "as one of the winners, I knew the tale was not simple and certainly not as the newspapers reported."

What's more, the story will be personal, emotional, even confessional. And it will involve the highest stakes. Watson intends to explain how he scaled the heights, and how he earned contempt along the way. We know this because he puts it all right there at the top, in the scene with Seeds. A peculiar sense of mingled pride and sin was central to his book. In the course of his research he had arguably violated several unwritten rules of professional conduct, and had made enemies of some colleagues who found his behavior at best unbecoming and at worst unethical. Years afterward, Watson told the historian Horace Freeland Judson that he'd first thought of writing his story for *The New Yorker* under the header "Annals of Crime."

Watson's working title for the book was *Honest Jim*.

## In the course of his research, Watson arguably violated several unwritten rules of professional conduct, and made enemies of some colleagues who found his behavior at best unbecoming.

AFTER HIS PROLOGUE IN THE ALPS, Watson begins at the beginning, with Francis Crick, his partner in crime. Watson was 23 and Crick was 35 when they met at the University of Cambridge, where Watson, an American, had come for post-doctoral study after receiving his PhD from Indiana University. The two men were colorful and cocky, not to mention arrogant. (The first line of Chapter One is famous: "I have never seen Francis Crick in a modest mood.") They bonded instantly over their sense that the secret of the gene was the most important problem in biology.

From the work of a little team of biologists at the Rockefeller Institute, in New York, they knew that genes are made of deoxyribonucleic acid, DNA. To the two young scientists, the problem of the gene seemed incredibly, almost impossibly alluring. Watson calls it "the Rosetta Stone for unraveling the true secret of life." He thinks DNA will prove the key to figuring out how genes determine, among other things, "the color of our hair, our eyes, most likely our comparative intelligence, and maybe even our potential to amuse others."

But nobody knew how DNA is put together. You can't figure out how a heart pumps until you anatomize its chambers, and you can't know how DNA works until you model its chemical structure. To Watson, this point seemed obvious. And yet most geneticists were not very interested in learning the chemical nature of the gene—which, to Watson, only proved that those geneticists were fools. He and Crick shared a contempt for many of their senior colleagues. Most old professors, Watson writes, are "not only narrowminded and dull, but also just stupid." He was convinced that building a model of the structure of DNA would do spectacular things for both biology and his own career.

There were, of course, obstacles. For one thing, their research plans were hampered by "an awkward personal situation." The only biologist in England working on the molecular structure of DNA was a friend of Crick's, a shy, somewhat slow-moving scientist named Maurice Wilkins. For all practical purposes, DNA was Wilkins's personal property, at least by the English rules of fair play, Watson writes, and "it would have looked very bad if Francis had jumped in on a problem that Maurice had worked over for several years." Wilkins's research was hobbled because he didn't get along with his assistant, Rosalind Franklin. Franklin was making the world's best X-ray pictures of DNA, but Wilkins couldn't stand her, and neither could Watson and Crick.

MEANWHILE, LINUS PAULING, WHOM Watson describes as the "world's greatest chemist," was also working on the problem of the structure of DNA. Being an American at Cal Tech, Pauling "was not subject to the confines of British fair play," writes Watson, who was terrified that Pauling would get there first. So young Watson and Crick raced for the gold. And Watson the narrator tells the story so adroitly that we enjoy watching them work together, like Woodward and Bernstein in *All the President's Men*. We root for them even when they do the slightly shady things that will later make a colleague snub Watson in the Alps. Watson and Crick go around Franklin's back by conniving a bit with Wilkins. They keep tabs on Pauling's progress by buddying up with his son Peter, a young biologist who is visiting Cambridge. When the elder Pauling makes a silly mistake that slows his research, Watson and Crick toast his failure.

Even though Watson was pushing 40 when he wrote the book, he tells it

all (after that first scene in the Alps) in the voice of the brash, socially awkward young man he was in his early twenties. So we get high-spirited reports on the day-to-day life of a scientist in Cambridge. We hear about the disgusting food in the dining halls ("brown soup, stringy meat, and heavy pudding") and about "the poison put out by the local Indian and Cypriote establishments." We hear about tennis, parties, girls, "sherry with girls." He gets surprisingly frank. We see Watson trying to put the naked Hedy Lamarr in *Ecstasy* out of his mind and concentrate on chemical bonds.

Watson imparts solid lessons in chemistry along the way. When you have a strong story, you can weave in a lot of science without your readers rebelling. The false starts and wrong turns in the research are all brilliantly described. The climactic scene where Watson assembles his model at the lab on Saturday morning, February 28, 1953, is one of the great eureka moments in the history of science. He fusses with some pieces of stiff cardboard, fiddling them together on his desktop, and, suddenly, there it is—the most elegant molecule he's ever seen, a beautiful rising shape like a spiral staircase: the double helix.

And the book's ending is almost as good as the beginning. We leave the wan young man in Paris feeling tired and a bit old. He was about to celebrate his birthday. There was a party ahead. "But now I was alone, looking at the long-haired girls near Saint-Germain-des-Prés and knowing they were not for me. I was twenty-five and too old to be unusual."

Back in that first scene, in the Alps, he had been preparing for an ascent. Now the race was over. He had won, and he was coming down.

"WHO COULD POSSIBLY WANT TO READ stuff like this?" Crick wondered, when Watson showed him a chapter of the work in progress in a little restaurant near Harvard Square. Since their discovery, the two men had become famous in their field. ("Rather than believe that Watson and Crick made the DNA structure, I would rather stress that the structure made Watson and Crick," wrote Crick later on.) They had won a Nobel Prize (which they shared with Maurice

Wilkins) in 1962. Now, with their careers and reputations secured, Crick didn't think Watson's story was an appropriate one to tell. Neither did Wilkins. Neither did the molecular biologist Gunther Stent, who, after reading an early draft of *Honest Jim*, predicted that nobody would ever buy it. The volumes on their coffee tables were the same as my dad's. In most of those books, it was the science that was important; the grubby personal details were unfit to print.

When the editor of Harvard University Press acquired Watson's memoir, Crick and Wilkins both campaigned to block its publication. In the spring of 1967, Crick composed a furious six-page letter addressed to Watson, the editor of the press, the president of Harvard, and others, writing, "Should you persist in regarding your book as history I should add that it shows such a naive and egotistical view of the subject as to be scarcely credible." He said Watson had omitted "any intellectual content.... Your view of history is that found in the lower class of women's magazines." In the end, Harvard rejected the manuscript, which Watson promptly gave to a commercial publisher. On February 15, 1968, the story hit the front page of *The New York Times*, under the headline, A BOOK THAT COULDN'T GO TO HARVARD.

*The Double Helix* was published on February 26, 1968, 15 years after Watson's eureka moment, almost to the day. As a high school freshman, I thought the story was purely terrific. Watson was smart and talented, he knew what his elders didn't, and he won the prize. I'm sure even his trouble with girls seemed sympathetic. He holds onto the box of chocolates at the party? Sure. He likes to imagine himself becoming famous? Of course. He has to fight to keep Hedy Lamarr out of his mind while he studies? Naturally.

Long ago, unfortunately, I lost my copy of whatever it was I wrote for *The Laureate*. But many of the other reviews that appeared that year have been collected and preserved in the Norton Critical Edition of *The Double Helix*. I find it interesting now to see what reviewers were thinking on higher floors in the towers of academia. Most of them were outraged. The molecular biolo-

gist Robert L. Sinsheimer found Watson's worldview "unbelievably mean in spirit, filled with the distorted and cruel perceptions of childish insecurity." The evolutionary biologist Richard S. Lewontin called the book a paradox. "The Nobel Prize has acquired virtue by being awarded to virtuous men by virtuous men. Its total value is in its image. Yet, having craved and acquired it, Watson devalues it, debasing the currency of his own life."

Not every reviewer was angry. The physicist who reviewed the book for *Life* wrote that Watson's book "should kill the myth that great science must be cold, impersonal or detached." On the other hand, the physiologist who reviewed the book for *Scientific American* declared that Watson had proven himself to be just that: "His characteristics are

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## Most of the reviewers at the time were outraged.

essentially cold logic, hypersensitivity and lack of affectivity." He added, "May God protect us from such friends."

Both of those reviews mentioned the scene in the Alps, and both quoted Seeds's line, "How is *Honest Jim*?" One reviewer concluded, "How's *Honest Jim*? Fine, just fine." The other reviewer ended cuttingly: "Yes, how is *Honest Jim*?"

THE BOOK MADE WATSON A CELEBRITY. It spent 18 weeks on *The New York Times* best-seller list; it was translated into at least 17 languages. Watson left Harvard to direct the Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory, on Long Island, and turned it into one of the world's great research centers. Meanwhile, many of the people he'd offended back in Cambridge were mad all over again.

Crick had come off pretty well in the book, though he didn't think so himself. He hated the way Watson had framed their story as a sordid race for fame and

glory, and spent years plotting revenge with his lab mates, dreaming up titles and zingers for his own memoir. He thought he might call it *The Loose Screw*, and joked about how he might start his Chapter One, "Jim was always clumsy with his hands. One had only to see him peel an orange..." (When Crick finally got around to writing his own memoir, *What Mad Pursuit*, he chose a quiet, restrained beginning. You realize how much you love a good story like Watson's when you read Crick's doggedly plain first line: "The main purpose of this book is to set out some of my experiences before and during the classical period of molecular biology...")

Other biologists in the story had to live their whole lives in the twisted shadow of the double helix. The book's most famous victim is Rosalind Franklin, who died ten years before it appeared. Her early death in 1958 cheated her of her chance to tell her side of the story (and of any chance to share the Nobel Prize). Many others, whose work had laid the foundations for Watson and Crick's discovery, suffered because they weren't in the book at all. Watson's book was such a powerful story that anyone who was left out of it was relegated to a footnote forever after.

I visited Mac McCarty on June 29, 2000. He was the last survivor of the team at Rockefeller that had discovered that genes are made of DNA. He was 89 years old, and sat in a wheelchair in the middle of the living room, recounting his discovery in front of big picture windows overlooking high rises and the Fifty-ninth Street Bridge.

Two days before, at the White House, President Clinton had announced the completion of the Human Genome Project. Mac's wife, Marge, had a copy of *The New York Times* in the foyer, open to the headline, **READING THE BOOK OF LIFE: A HISTORIC QUEST; DOUBLE LANDMARKS FOR WATSON: HELIX AND GENOME**. The *Times* had also run a sidebar with a timeline of discovery. She showed me where Mac appeared in the timeline: two little lines. "1944: Researchers at the Rockefeller Institute prove that genes are made of deoxyribonucleic acid." Suddenly, Marge, who had been stewing all afternoon, could no longer contain her anger.

"Researchers!" she cried. "What the shit is that? He's not Mr. Researcher!"

IN SOME WAYS, WATSON WAS A VICTIM of his book too. He'd been rewarded so spectacularly for his behavior in his early twenties. Among other things,

they only deepen its interest. For all its other virtues, the book's real gift is its demonstration that science and story go well together. And a good story is always going to be human—lofty and ugly, high and low. Dr. Watson's discovery is much easier to understand than Dr. Watson.

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**For all its other virtues, the book's real gift is its demonstration that science and story go well together. And good stories include both the lofty and the ugly, the high and the low.**

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he had learned to be flippant at Cambridge, he writes. He saw that "success in Cambridge conversation frequently came from saying something preposterous, hoping that someone would take you seriously."

He seems to have learned that lesson for life. After all, his disdain for good manners had won him fame and fortune twice over: first as a scientist, then as an author. Why stop, now that he was a statesman of science? When I first met Watson, at a lunch in the late 1990s, he made outrageous claims about blacks in America's inner cities. I argued with him. At length, he said to me, "You seem very concerned about principles. What's a principle?"

Many other reporters had that kind of experience too. But Watson's opinions about race, gender, and other such topics stayed more or less unpublished until, while promoting a memoir titled *Avoid Boring People*, he shared them, in some detail, with a reporter visiting Cold Spring Harbor. The fateful interview ran October 14, 2007, in *The Times* of London, under the headline **THE ELEMENTARY DNA OF DR WATSON**. The reaction was swift. Watson had to cancel his book tour and resign as head of Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory. He came in for ridicule a few months later when the Icelandic company deCODE Genetics reported hints in Watson's own DNA of African ancestors.

Do Watson's late years diminish *The Double Helix*? On the contrary: I'd say

I've spent my career writing books about science and scientists. (One of them tells the story of a great biologist named Seymour Benzer, who is a footnote in *The Double Helix*.) They're all driven by story as much as they are by science; and in every one I've struggled to make the story and the science seem all of a piece, as they do in the book I reviewed as a freshman, 44 years ago.

As I recall, my only regret about *The Double Helix* back in 1968 was that it had taken so long for Watson to sit down and write it. He sounded young, but he really wasn't. That was the one sin I found it hard to forgive him—he was almost 40. I saved this criticism for the last line of my review, the only sentence I can still remember: "It is disappointing to realize that the book's young hero is now middle-aged."

Today, I have a few years on Watson the author—20 years, to be exact. I see so much more in his story now than I did the first time around, and even more on each re-reading. And, every time, I think: This is the place to go, for a writer. Somewhere in the twining of science and story, this is where you can write about life itself.

Gifts of a great book. **CJR**

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JONATHAN WEINER is the Maxwell M. Geffen Professor of Medical and Scientific Journalism at Columbia's Graduate School of Journalism. He is the author of several books, including *The Beak of the Finch*, which won the Pulitzer Prize.



## The re-entry problem

America's tough-on-crime policies didn't work. Now what?

BY ALAN PRENDERGAST

OVER THE COURSE OF EIGHT DAYS IN 1978, a 15-year-old terror named Willie Bosket managed to satisfy his curiosity about what it felt like to kill someone. He did this by purchasing a .22 handgun from his mother's boyfriend, paid for with funds obtained from robbing sleeping passengers in New York City's subway system, and shooting his next two robbery victims in the head.

Bosket considered the experience to be nothing special, according to Fox Butterfield's 1996 study, *All God's Children: The Bosket Family and the American Tradition of Violence*. But his case soon became a focus of public outrage. At the time, New York prosecutors had no mechanism for trying such a young defendant as an adult; Bosket was facing a maximum of five years in the state's juvenile system. The furor over the light sentence prompted a new state law that allowed offenders as young as 13 to be tried in adult court for violent crimes. "The New York law marked a break from the Progressive tradition, which since the turn of the century had maintained that children were different from adults and capable of rehabilitation," notes Jeff Kunerth in his book *Trout: A True Story of Murder, Teens, and the Death Penalty*.

Over the next 15 years—in a tough-on-crime frenzy that extended throughout the Reagan revolution and well into the Clinton era—lawmakers in other states had their own Bosket moments, granting prosecutors the authority to "direct file" adult charges against juveniles without first requiring a transfer proceeding before a juvenile court judge. They also increased drug penalties; cut prison programs that were supposed to provide skills and education to help offenders return to society; slowed or abolished early release and parole processes; and embarked on a prison-building boom that seemed to be driven not by rational policy, but by lurid press accounts of remorseless, baby-faced killers and predictions about a coming wave of adolescent "superpredators" that never arrived.

The long-term consequences of this rage to punish have been severe. It's often said that the United States has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the world, but what truly distinguishes the American experiment in mass imprisonment is the length of the sentences involved. We're good at not just locking up offenders but throwing away the key. As a result, despite declining crime rates, many states are

### **Trout: A True Story of Murder, Teens, and the Death Penalty**

By Jeff Kunerth  
University Press of Florida  
194 pages, \$24.95

### **Life After Murder: Five Men in Search of Redemption**

By Nancy Mullane  
Public Affairs  
354 pages, \$26.99

wrestling with budget-devouring prison populations, including a significant number of inmates who were locked up in their late teens or early twenties and have been inside for decades. (Approximately 2,300 of them are serving life without parole for crimes committed as juveniles.) In recent years, fiscal pressures and Supreme Court decisions have prompted a re-evaluation of the reliance on stiff sentences—and have even renewed efforts to implement programs designed to aid parolees in "re-entry," if not rehabilitation. Two recent books by journalists, reporting on aspects of this shift from opposite coasts, suggest that the pendulum of criminal justice is indeed swinging back toward the possibility of redemption—albeit clumsily and haltingly.

The specter of Willie Bosket looms over *Trout*, which tracks the downward journey of three adolescents involved in the 1991 robbery of a Trout Auto Parts store in Pensacola, FL, during which a clerk named Billy Wayne Coker was shot and killed. His killer, 17-year-old Patrick Bonifay, didn't know Coker and may have been hired by his uncle to murder another employee, whom the uncle blamed for getting him fired from the store. The homicide was subject to different interpretations over time, and Bonifay has offered conflicting motives for his actions, but there's no escaping the essential stupidity and viciousness of the crime. Kunerth describes it as "a premeditated mistaken-identity murder for money inflicted upon an unintended victim who was shot to death while begging for his life."

A staff writer for the *Orlando Sentinel*, Kunerth uses this obscure case to demonstrate the disturbing ease with which juveniles are transformed into adults in Florida's justice system—not just Bonifay but his codefendants, one of whom may not have known that murder was on the menu that night. The police neatly sidestep parental-notification requirements while extracting confessions from two of the teens; the third, already 18, also cooperates and is stunned to learn that he's being arrested rather than released to his parents. The district attorney plays the naïve crew against each other, persuading one of the group to testify against Bonifay and Bonifay to



**All grown up** Top row, left to right, the defendants in the Trout murder at the time of their arrest: Patrick Bonifay, Eddie Fordham, Clifford Barth, and Robin Lee Archer. Bottom row, those same individuals after 20 years in prison.

testify against his uncle, in hope of some leniency—but the state's felony murder statute makes each defendant liable for the homicide. The defense is perfunctory, the verdicts swift. Bonifay and his uncle get the death penalty, while the other teens end up with life sentences, with the possibility of parole in 25 years.

Bonifay was on death row for only a few weeks, Kunerth observes, before another juvenile joined him there. Florida is one of several states that has no minimum age limit for prosecuting children as adults, and the state has executed inmates as young as 16. But in the late 1990s, emerging brain research, which confirmed longstanding notions about adolescents' impulse-control issues and thrill-seeking behavior, began to offer a scientific basis for challenging such executions. "Psychopathic behavior in an adult is set in stone," Kunerth writes, "but the same behavior in a teenager is a common but transitory stage of development that can't be used to predict who that person will become." In 2005, the US Supreme Court ruled that the death penalty could no longer be imposed on defendants under the age of 18, citing juveniles' immaturity, still-developing personalities, and susceptibility to peer pressure.

The decision moved Bonifay from death row to a life sentence. Readers of Kunerth's brisk, unsentimental treatment of him may wonder if that's much of a reprieve. Studies show that juveniles tend to have a particularly difficult adjustment to prison life, and the description of Bonifay and his codefendants aging through their long sentences is harrowing. Bonifay, we learn, converted to Islam, recanted his testimony against his uncle, and appears to live largely in a fantasy world of his own devising:

In many ways, Patrick the middle-aged man was still Patrick the teenage boy. Prison doesn't allow a juvenile to move through the stages and responsibilities of life that produce a mature adult.... Patrick regarded himself as a new man with a new name and a new religion, but in many respects he remained unchanged, a man in age only preserved in prison as a child.

In his loneliest hours, Patrick longed for the certainty of death row.

WHATEVER NEW PERSONAE THEY MAY assume, the convicted teens in *Trout* remain frozen in time, stuck in a system that's equally indifferent to expressions of bravado or remorse. The Supreme

Court is now considering whether life without parole is cruel and unusual punishment for juveniles, raising the prospect that Bonifay may someday be eligible for release. Nancy Mullane's *Life After Murder: Five Men in Search of Redemption* examines the hurdles confronting similarly situated men when the thaw comes. Can convicted murderers lead peaceful and productive lives? Mullane thinks so; she finds hope, at least, in the discovery that most killers, despite their bad press, turn out to be human after all.

In 2007, Mullane, a San Francisco-based reporter and producer for *This American Life* and other public-radio programs, began an assignment on California's overcrowded prison system. She quickly became fascinated with the individuals behind the numbers—and with the state's convoluted and deeply politicized parole process, an obstacle course of hearings and setbacks and reversals that has contributed to the logjam. Over the next four years, she followed the efforts of five San Quentin inmates, all convicted of murder, to obtain release and make a life for themselves on the outside, a project that resulted in her book and a two-hour radio documentary.

Mullane's killers were young men when they committed their crimes—some not yet out of their teens. Unlike the elaborate and purposeful mayhem depicted in crime dramas, most real-life murders are dumb, impulsive outbursts of violence. Even the minimal planning of the Trout robbery is missing from the accounts of random bloodshed the inmates relate to Mullane, committed by young hotheads they no longer recognize. "Ended up going out one night to do a robbery and ended up shooting a man and killed him," one says, adding that his arrest was "sort of like a relief": "I didn't like the way I was living at all."

Mullane admits to letting her imagination run wild during her first visit to San Quentin: "I survived being in a small room, alone, with half a dozen murderers, and they didn't try to kill me when they had the chance." She seems a bit wide-eyed about prison life, dwelling on details, such as the claustrophobic cells, that should already be familiar to any viewer of MSNBC's *Lockup* or similar reality shows. She's amazed that there's a sweat lodge available to Native Americans and gets chewed out for hugging a downcast prisoner, in violation of no-contact rules. More troubling, though, is her willingness to accept at face value the inmates' somewhat self-serving accounts of their crimes. She makes use of court documents to flesh out one inmate's story and visits restorative justice programs, in which prisoners and crime victims interact, but she also declares her lack of interest in interviewing victims' families; she doesn't even seek out the niece of one homicide victim who's actually supporting the killer's parole. This is a curious omission. The perspective of victims' families can not only provide a reality check on a convicted felon's version of his crimes, but also offer insights into the burgeoning power of the victims' rights lobby, which has had an enormous influence on legislation and sentencing policy.

It's just such political considerations that have spawned California's highly dysfunctional parole system. The "lifers" Mullane profiles have indeterminate sentences and a shot, in theory, of being released someday. Regardless of their accomplishments inside—earning college credits, completing substance-

## Is life without parole for juveniles cruel and unusual punishment?

abuse programs—they are turned down for years before being granted parole. But that isn't the end of the process. California's governor can overrule the parole board's findings; the aspiring convict must wait another agonizing five months to learn if the board's grant of release will stand. Often, it doesn't.

The statistics Mullane compiled are revealing. Of the thousands of lifers in the state eligible for parole in a given year, only a handful are found suitable for release—and most of those have their parole overturned by gubernatorial fiat. Pete Wilson approved only 131 lifer paroles during his eight years in office. Gray Davis let out a total of eight in six years. Arnold Schwarzenegger rejected only about three-fourths of the approved paroles that crossed his desk.

This adamant refusal to parole murderers, even if they've become model prisoners and fit all the criteria for release, costs the state hundreds of millions of dollars a year. But it's hardly surprising; what future presidential candidate wants to have the next Willie Horton dogging his or her campaign trail? Yet all of Mullane's profile subjects eventually did get out, thanks in part to a 2008 California Supreme Court ruling that parole can't be denied simply because of the heinous nature of the crime. Although the governors invoked public-safety concerns as the justification for their denials, it's a feeble argument in the case of long-term prisoners with good records. Lifers can get institutionalized and have problems returning to society, but they are statistically less likely to reoffend than younger felons. Mullane contends that it's the prisoners released with little assistance after serving determinate sentences who pose the greatest safety risk: "Of the 1,000 prisoners paroled by the State of California in the past 21 years who were serving a sentence of life with the possibility of parole for committing murder, not one has committed murder again."

Mullane chronicles the lives of the five parolees as they leave prison, reunite with long-suffering families, get overwhelmed ordering from menus, and struggle to find work and forge new relationships. The devastation their crimes left behind, not to mention the void in themselves, can't be easily remedied. (One of the five is the father of two boys who were two and eight years old when he shot the drug dealer who stole his wife; by the time he gets out, they're in their twenties—and in prison.) Mullane is there to observe many of the events she recounts, in contrast to Kurerth's more conventional true-crime technique, which involves dramatizing scenes culled from interviews with the participants—a tricky business when the sources' stories don't agree. Mullane's radio-reporter approach seems more intimate at first, but I soon became too conscious of her as a chatty presence in the story, dropping in on the men in the hope of gaining some revelatory bit of action and even inviting the whole crew to Thanksgiving dinner in order to provide a parting scene. The tightwire that parolees must walk isn't empty of drama, but a successful re-entry doesn't have a tidy ending, just a slow settling in to something like normalcy.

Still, it's encouraging to learn that none of Mullane's subjects had violated parole by the time she completed her research. Her account manages to put human faces on people who are too often demonized by the media—and then forgotten. As its title suggests, *Life After Murder* makes a strong argument that a sane sentencing policy should address the reality that, long after even the most terrible sins of youth, people can change.

Sadly, the change isn't always for the better. Some teen offenders become injured to prison life. Willie Bosket escaped from a youth facility and was sent to an adult prison. He committed other crimes during his brief periods of freedom, was sentenced as a habitual criminal, then was convicted of assaults on staff while housed in a maximum-security prison. He won't be eligible for parole until 2062, when he's 99 years old. **CJR**

ALAN PRENDERGAST is a staff writer for *Westword* and the author of *The Poison Tree: A True Story of Family Violence and Revenge*.

## A master's missteps

*Fixated on Kapuscinski's flaws, a new biography misses the point*

BY TED CONOVER

CELEBRATED FOR HIS REPORTAGE about world-changing events and leaders of his day—the Iranian Revolution, Che Guevara and the Cuban Revolution, Emperor Haile Selassie of Ethiopia—the Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski has remained in the headlines since his death in 2007 largely due to questions about his veracity: How accurate was his reporting? How truthfully did he describe his own life? Were his stories so memorable because he made them up?

A biography published in Poland in 2010 but only now appearing in English takes up these questions. In fact, in many places Artur Domoslawski's *Ryszard Kapuscinski: A Life* reads like a book written by a fact-checker: exhaustive and focused on the details, some of them significant but many picayune. If the reader of a typical biography might expect to come away understanding what made the subject great, the reader of this book finishes wondering if the hero is still standing; he has been subjected to a thousand doubts and quibbles, example after example of an assertion of Kapuscinski's being contradicted by somebody who outlived him.

To those who value accuracy above all else, this result may gratify. And the granular parsing of his many writings and public statements may have been a necessary reckoning for Poland, where Kapuscinski remains a major literary figure. But for those unfamiliar with Kapuscinski's pioneering reportage about the Third World—a New Journalism that engaged the world beyond the United States—this book might not be the best place to start.

The inquisition starts with Kapuscinski's childhood in Pinsk; Domoslawski opens by comparing Kapuscinski's writings to the memories of his sister, Barbara. Unsurprisingly, they diverge. This microscopic examination of Kapuscinski's early life goes on for pages. Eventually, we glimpse the Poland Kapuscinski inhabited as a college student and adult—a Communist state where success as a journalist depended on not only intellect but one's ability to move adroitly through the halls of power, delicately finessing relationships both with peers and with government officials. We learn when Kapuscinski joined the Communist party, whom he told about it, and whom he did not tell.

This is the most substantial and interesting part of the book, a real contribution to our knowledge of Kapuscinski and of Poland. For the great majority of his career, the writer's travel was financed by his government, especially the Polish Press

### Ryszard Kapuscinski: A Life

By Artur Domoslawski  
Verso Books  
472 pages, \$34.95

Agency. Domoslawski explains how that worked: what publications he allied himself with, and with what support from bureaucrats. He shows how Kapuscinski responded to the rise of the Solidarity trade union and the decline of the Communist regime. We see him awkwardly navigate social events attended both by party stalwarts and by progressives, see him walk away from old friends. Domoslawski even lets the Party guys tell how they felt betrayed by the new Kapuscinski as he (literally, at least in one scene) pretended not to know them.

The most damaging revelations about Kapuscinski appeared in Polish *Newsweek* four months after his death. Documents from the archives of the Communist intelligence service showed that the writer had collaborated with them for several years. Domoslawski parses the charges and concludes that the writer ultimately offered the spies very little of use—his main expertise, according to one of Kapuscinski's intelligence handlers, was “at ducking and diving!”

In one area, however, Kapuscinski took a clear hit. This was in a report he sent his handlers after speaking with Maria Sten, an academic who “was sacked from her job on the wave of anti-Semitic purges of 1968 and emigrated to Mexico,” where the writer caught up with her. The dispatch, says Domoslawski,

contains clichés typical of the official, anti-Semitic propaganda (Kapuscinski calls Poles of Jewish origin who were forced to leave Poland at that time “Zionists”). By passing this information about Maria Sten to the intelligence service, could he have done her harm? Probably not. Sten was not planning to return to Poland, and Kapuscinski knew that. Despite this fact, does the note have the tone of a denunciation? Unfortunately, yes, it does.

Domoslawski's note of regret here, as throughout, is suspect. He refers to Kapuscinski as “the master” and his “mentor.” He calls him his “friend” and makes clear they had conversations over several years; but lots of people in the book are identified as Kapuscinski's friends who, more likely, met him once or twice in a professional setting, and, truly, Domoslawski seems to be one of these.

Kapuscinski kept two sets of notebooks when he traveled—one for the





**The facts of a life** Kapuscinski and his wife, Alicja (left), on holiday in Paris in 1964 with their friend, the *Polityka* journalist Agnieszka Wróblewska (right).

day-to-day dispatches he filed for the press agency, another for his subjective impressions. The source of his fame, you might say, was in the value added by that second set of notebooks in which, as he once put it, he attempted to record "the atmosphere of the street, the feeling of the people, the gossip of the town, the smell; the thousand, thousand elements of reality that are part of the event you read about in 600 words in your morning paper." Strict accuracy was not his paramount concern; when a friend who had been with him during riots in Dar es Salaam commented that he had misreported certain details, she says he shouted at her, "You don't understand a thing! I'm not writing so the details add up—the point is the essence of the matter." Thus he left a long list of embellishments for Domoslawski to catalog. When Kapuscinski wrote, for example, that fish in Lake Victoria became big after feeding on the corpses dumped there by Idi Amin, he was telling a good tale, but not one that was true.

Many stories from *The Emperor*, perhaps Kapuscinski's most celebrated book, have come in for similar scrutiny: the famous anecdote about Haile Selassie's servant, whose job was to wipe the shoes of visitors who had been peed on by Lulu, the royal lapdog, for instance. Domoslawski finds an expert who asserts it was unlikely that

Kapuscinski ever entered the palace, and that he probably heard the tale at a dinner party of local foreigners. But observers have doubted the literal truth of this book for years. Reviewing *The Emperor* in *The New York Times* in 1983, Xan Smiley wrote, "I suspect it is all a shade hyped up, a little too cleverly processed from stumbling interview to sleek literary parable." Others say that Poles immediately recognized in *The Emperor* an allegory to the Communist clique that ran the country pre-Solidarity, with Kapuscinski criticizing them as best he could.

Now it has all been definitively weighed, from Selassie's lapdog to whether Kapuscinski actually witnessed the massacre at Mexico's Tlatelolco Square in 1968—and a whole lot of less-momentous questions as well. I suppose it was a necessary exercise.

But it is not especially enjoyable to read. One imagines "the master's" ghost uneasy as his reputation is challenged once again by ideology—this time the ideology of factuality, of literal-mindedness. It happens to be an ideology to which I subscribe. So why do I flinch upon seeing Kapuscinski subjected to its rigors? Maybe because I like a good story, and enjoyed reading those books, and never assumed them to be perfectly true.

This book won the Grand Press prize, Poland's top journalistic honor, but also

prompted legal action by Kapuscinski's widow Alicja, who tried and failed to stop publication. Domoslawski agonizes over the damage he correctly predicts his book will do to the dead man's reputation. "I catch myself fearing that, without meaning to write an exposé, I am discovering facts about the master's life which I would rather not know at all, and that I am creating a platform for massively negative opinions of him," he writes. Still, he continues, "a portrait of Kapuscinski in which frailties and flaws are visible is more genuine than a beatified icon... isn't this version of Kapuscinski more interesting than the one that is flattered to death?"

Who would disagree? It's better not to admire a fantasy. But in focusing on a single metric—factuality—in assessing Kapuscinski's life and work, the biographer has reduced his subject unfairly. Passages of *Shah of Shahs* and *The Soccer War* deserve to be read for how they enlarged readers' awareness of and empathy for the world. Kapuscinski crossed the globe in search of oppressed people demanding a better way to live. He sought new ways to make revolution intelligible, to explain to those of us who might not have seen it ourselves how the future opens up when the oppressed reach a point when they can submit no longer. In *Shah of Shahs*, he wrote,

All books about all revolutions begin with a chapter that describes the decay of tottering authority or the misery and sufferings of the people. They should begin with a psychological chapter, one that shows how a harassed, terrified man suddenly breaks his terror, stops being afraid.

Domoslawski cites it as an example of Kapuscinski foretelling the rebellion of Polish shipyard workers. But to me it's a through-line for Kapuscinski's best work. He wanted to hear those cries and amplify them. To do that, he worked out a new language for reportage. Newcomers should appreciate the asterisk that's now attached: *Warning! Contents may be embellished!* But then, I hope, they'll read Kapuscinski anyway. **CJR**

TED CONOVER, the author of several books, including *Newjack*, is writer-in-residence at NYU's Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute.

# The astroturf Cassandra

Why hacks like Andrew Keen really fear the social Web

BY MAUREEN TKACIK

LONG BEFORE FACEBOOK OR FOUR-square, men like the late management consultant Martin Jay Levitt were connoisseurs of social networks. At the beginning of each new gig Levitt would have a client's human resources director create detailed diagrams mapping the relationships between all employees, accounting for gossip, date of hire and pay, even details of his sex life, if any were known. Then, after immersing himself in the P2P logistical cartography of an enterprise, Levitt would ply the firm's lowest-ranking supervisors for still more dirt, assuring each that whatever he revealed would be confined to that room. ("That, of course, was a bold and cruel lie," Levitt later confessed.) Then he impressed upon them their unifying mission by invoking a time-tested analogy to humanize the threat they were being called to conquer:

I scanned the faces and focused on a young, blond, gentle-looking man: "You married?" I asked.  
 "Yes, sir," the man replied.  
 I moved in closer. "You love your wife?"  
 "Yes sir."  
 "You sleep with your wife?"  
 The man blushed. "Uh, yes, sir."  
 "Well," I continued, "how would you like it if your mother-in-law slept between you and your wife every night?"  
 The crowd broke out in laughter, and a voice from the back of the room hooted, "Not bad. You should see his mother-in-law."

Like Levitt, Andrew Keen is a smooth-talking hired gun who blankets the country warning conference rooms full of middle managers about the straw-men dangers that await them if they share with one another too freely. A few years back he blogged that the nascent social-networking craze was "reminiscent of Marx"; today he broadcasts his Twitter handle on the cover of a book in which he likens the insidious grip of Web 2.0 to the "Summer of Love." This time, Keen's adversary is a "networked mob of 21st century small brothers" that in aggregate threaten nothing less than "the death of individual liberty."

But while everyone in the room with Levitt knew what he was getting at—the workers had started a campaign to unionize, and the "mother-in-law" was

invoked to represent the shop steward preventing supervisors from fucking their subordinates—Keen's agenda is more mysterious. The book reads like it has been composed on the work-only Tweetdeck of a professional social-media aggregator who aspires to one day attend a TED conference, only the hyperlinks to all the vacuous content he aggregates have been swapped out for footnotes—637 in total, giving the reader innumerable opportunities to gasp at the gall required to title this maddening thing "#digitalvertigo." It is such a distinctly displeasurable and unsatisfying read that I was forced to reconsider my initial assumption that Keen was just another wannabe Gladwell.

Keen's career as a Web 2.0 cultural critic is premised largely upon his having founded a dotcom he immodestly remembers as "an early paragon of the online revolution" all the way back in 1995. But two 1999 Audiocafe.com press releases (and a few trade publication obits that ran upon the startup's demise in April 2000) state that Keen founded the firm in November 1998. Keen will inevitably turn this little hoax into part of his schtick, since the whole reason he's here is to sow doubt and distrust toward anything you read on the Internet. But the fact remains that, for all the networked mobs Keen claims to have incensed, if he posed a threat to anyone who mattered, this bit of résumé-fudging would have come up somewhere amid the thousands of reviews, rebuttals, and profiles information workers have squandered on the guy.

And yet it has gone unnoticed. The networked mobs Keen rails against intuitively recognize the truth in what he says. Social networking is ultimately unsatisfying, disorienting, and vaguely dehumanizing. Duh. But all that is an outgrowth of the fact that social networking as we now know it, from the 140-character limits to the desperately pointless decisions to "like" each and every comment posted about each and every new baby photo, is so gratuitously infantilizing. So in attempting to reconcile my ostensibly contradictory contempt for Keen and Web 2.0, I was forced to ponder whether it had to be that way.

Which is how I came to reconsider a relic of a halcyon age when the Internet

briefly seemed as though it might become a force for something other than nihilism, narcissism, and derivatives trading: Friendster, the first major social networking site. With two simple innovations, Friendster engendered all the trust and sense of community the Internet today seems poised to destroy: one, its software would furnish, on command, an intricate diagram of the degrees of separation between you and any given user; and two, the "wall" was designated for more formal "testimonials" to the user's friendship abilities, which generally read something like uncensored wedding toasts. For each friend you had access to hundreds of friends-of-friends' testimonials, and when a stranger tried to friend you there was a complex web of accountability to help you assess the degree to which you could trust him.

It occurs to me now that Friendster's checks and balances, combined with its transparency, could have threatened the secretive hierarchy of entrenched organizations that assigns power and maintains the status quo. Men like Levitt invented diagrams like Friendster's to bust unions; they could have just as easily been deployed in the service of starting one. Corporations use social networking data to exploit consumers, smear critics, and infiltrate opposition movements, but mostly it's the information asymmetry they maintain, rather than the information itself, that makes them powerful. With Friendster, friendship and its defining element of "trust" briefly became more accessible and efficient. And then Tila Tequila and Mark Zuckerberg came along, and friendship was suddenly an acquisitive pursuit, an enterprise built upon leveraging one's brand.

Neither social networking sites nor Web 2.0 content will tell you much about Andrew Keen; his old blog's preposterously vague "Keen on Keen" page contains almost no dates or personal details. He seems to have had virtually no public profile prior to 2006, when he launched himself into tech pundit ubiquity with a blog, online video show, and *Weekly Standard* "manifesto."

It seems likely that Keen was at least initially an astroturf prophet sent to deliver Americans from the tyranny of "network neutrality" regulations, a cause for which Internet, cable, and wireless

## Leak

### Why Mark Felt Became Deep Throat

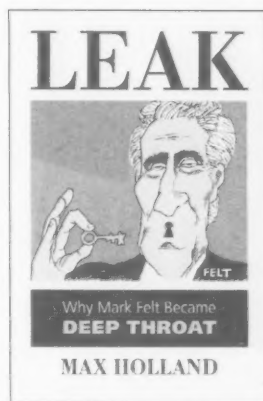
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corporations racked up a nearly \$200 million lobbying bill that year. Tellingly, his online video program AfterTV billed itself not only as a "public media service" designed to give voice to "visionaries and pioneers from all corners of culture, media, marketing and technology," but a provider of "private and proprietary intelligence" and "innovation services" to companies "interested in gaining a competitive advantage"; also that year AfterTV was acquired by an outfit run by one William E. Gordon III, former president of the Road Runner broadband subsidiary of Time Warner/MediaOne.

Whatever the case, Keen seems determined to keep the information asymmetry working toward his own competitive advantage, demagoguing in public about the dangers Facebook poses to democracy while delivering private "Masterclass" tutorials to the business and government elites of Oman, in which he argues that data will soon replace oil as "the most valuable commodity of the 21st century."

In his first book, *Cult of the Amateur*, Keen cited an ostensibly homemade YouTube video produced by a K Street lobbying firm in an effort to discredit Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth* as an example of the dangers of Web 2.0. He did not, however, disclose the role that a technology-commentary website wholly owned by that same K Street firm played in advancing his career. But from his inaugural essay in *The Weekly Standard* to the chapter he contributed to a 2011 book published by the telecom-funded astroturf think tank Tech Freedom, Keen's personal brand was created and largely sustained by the same clique of corporate shells that invented climate change denialism and supply-side economics.

In fact, I would bet that if you mapped the guy's uncensored social networking data there wouldn't be too many degrees of separation between Keen and Ed Wegman, the statistician who, in 2008, purported to use social network analysis to undermine the scientific consensus on climate change. Massive hunks of Wegman's paper—and the 2006 report to Congress on which it was based—were discovered to have been plagiarized, and a computer scientist named John Mashey has devoted much of the

past five years to detailing and diagramming the petrodollar-soaked networks that promoted (and continue to defend) Wegman's phony scholarship. Many of Mashey's early findings are documented in the book *Merchants of Doubt*, which traces the careers of the most visible group of academic climate change skeptics back to gigs downplaying the risks of tobacco and acid rain during the eighties.

But what if Web 2.0 had followed the Friendster model? What if everyone who participated in social networking was obliged to draw some distinction between their real friends and their marketing alliances, and everyone could access the map that would be generated from the aggregate of our mutual trust? The transmission and absorption of true knowledge could become markedly more efficient if networks of individuals who trusted one another's judgment could establish standards for policing the borders between speech and fraud.

And what of professional bullshitters like Keen? Ideally, he would either have to settle for his day job (whatever it is) or start adhering to the old saw about writing what you know—as opposed to writing what you think a consumer segment will deem appropriate or convincing or contrarian. Perhaps some of them would be shamed into reforming, as Martin Jay Levitt was when he was forced to survive in a trust-based community in a rehab facility for his alcoholism.

"I come from a very dirty business," he finally wrote in *Confessions of a Union Buster*. "The enemy is the collective spirit. A campaign against a union is an assault on individuals and a war on the truth." Do not bother with Levitt's Wikipedia page; he died eight years ago but the mercenaries are still at it, slaughtering truths and exorcising collective spirits and exploiting information asymmetries more profitably than ever from the comfort and safety of alter egos and avatars. As long as they are still trying to propagandize it out of history books and bullshit it off the trending topics, the truth lives, somewhere, and the collective spirit has only begun to recognize the power of merely reminding the world it still exists. **CJR**

MAUREEN TKACIK is a regular contributor to *Reuters* and *The Baffler*. Her personal blog is *DasKrap.com*.



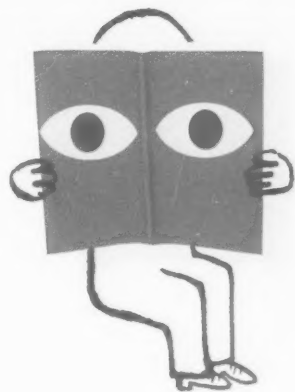
## BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

BY JAMES BOYLAN

**Hitlerland:**  
**American Eyewitnesses to the**  
**Nazi Rise to Power**  
 By Andrew Nagorski  
 Simon & Schuster  
 385 pages, \$28

AS ADOLF HITLER TRANSFORMED himself from a failed regional politician to the most feared tyrant of the 20th century, Americans were on hand to observe, report, and warn. Andrew Nagorski, a *Newsweek* veteran and now head of a public-policy think tank, has ingeniously stitched together the story of the diplomats, journalists, and other expatriates who worked in Germany during the two decades that ended with America's entry into World War II. There are many fascinating figures—the ill-prepared American ambassador, William E. Dodd, and his scandalous daughter, Martha, who slept her way into becoming a spy for Moscow; the consul general in Berlin, George Messersmith, fervent opponent of the Nazis. But the American correspondents, numbering an astonishing 30 or more in the prewar years, were the ones who most urgently warned their country of the growing menace.

Senior among them was Karl von Wiegand of the Hearst newspapers, who was initially impressed with Hitler but changed his mind. Sigrid Schultz of the *Chicago Tribune* remained through the entire period. Others were pushed out—Edgar Ansel Mowrer of the *Chicago*



*Daily News* was expelled soon after Hitler took power in 1933; Dorothy Thompson was never welcome for very long. Working in Berlin was often hard—dodging the thugs who assaulted people for failing to give the “Heil Hitler” salute; tolerating the slithery embrace of Hitler’s half-American press agent, Putzi Hanfstaengl. In the end, 15 American correspondents remained after Pearl Harbor and the German declaration of war. They were interned and exchanged for German counterparts in May 1942.

Summing up their work, Nagorski concludes that, whatever their lapses, most of the Americans “came to understand what was happening around them, even if they often found it hard to grasp the full implications...of a society undergoing a horrific transformation in the name of a demented ideology.” He gives particularly high marks to William Shirer, who was censored in his CBS Radio broadcasts but unmasked the Third Reich in his best-selling *Berlin Diary* (1941). Note: Nagorski mentions a few American turncoats, none professional journalists. But there was one exception he overlooks: Robert Henry

Best, a graduate of the Columbia School of Journalism and winner of a Pulitzer Traveling Fellowship, who remained in Germany when the others went home and did broadcasts for the Nazis; he was convicted of treason after the war and died in prison.

**Yazoo: Integration in a Deep Southern Town**  
 By Willie Morris  
 University of Arkansas Press  
 204 pages, \$19.95

WILLIE MORRIS, OF YAZOO City, MS, arrived in New York in 1963 glowing with promise, having been a Rhodes scholar and editor of the dissident *Texas Observer*. While writing a memoir, *North Toward Home*, that at once became a classic, he went to work for staid old *Harper's Magazine* and in 1967 became its youngest editor at 32. He scored an early coup in March 1968 by devoting an entire issue to Norman Mailer's article, “The Steps of the Pentagon,” which became the Pulitzer-winning nonfiction novel *The Armies of the Night*.

He lured into *Harper's* a galaxy of aggressive young writers, among them David Halberstam and Seymour Hersh, giving them space to display their wares, and helping to develop the genre that has come to be known as long-form journalism.

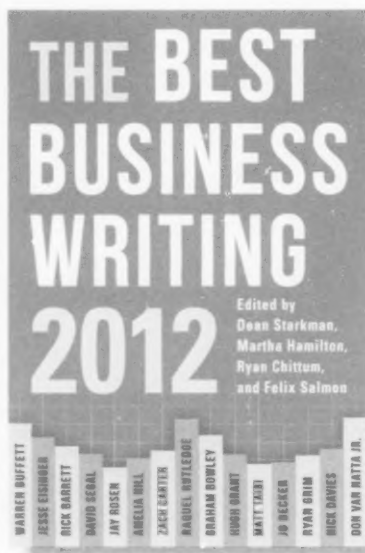
In 1969, Morris returned to his hometown to report on the state of race relations and school integration and

in June 1970 published in *Harper's* an article, “Yazoo...Notes on Survival.” He visited Yazoo City again later in 1970, but already clouds were gathering around him. There was political and financial friction with his magazine's owners, and Morris resigned in March 1971. Two months later, *Yazoo: Integration in a Deep Southern Town* was published.

The book, now in a new printing by the University of Arkansas Press, reflects little of the turmoil in Morris's own life or the radicalism of the magazine he was editing. He was a loyal son of Yazoo City and wanted very much to see its citizens overcome the racial disgrace of the early 1960s. He talked to all factions, black and white, and was pleased when massive integration of the schools, ordered by the courts, seemed to work. Yet, as his widow, Joanne Prichard Morris, observes in her deft afterword, Willie Morris lived to see Yazoo City resegregated, with almost all the white students enrolled in private academies. Near the end of his life—he died in 1999—Morris conceded that he got it wrong. But read as journalism created in its own moment, *Yazoo* was right and remains so, a tribute to the better angels Morris saw in his hometown. **CJR**

JAMES BOYLAN is the founding editor of the Columbia Journalism Review and professor emeritus of journalism and history at the University of Massachusetts—Amherst.

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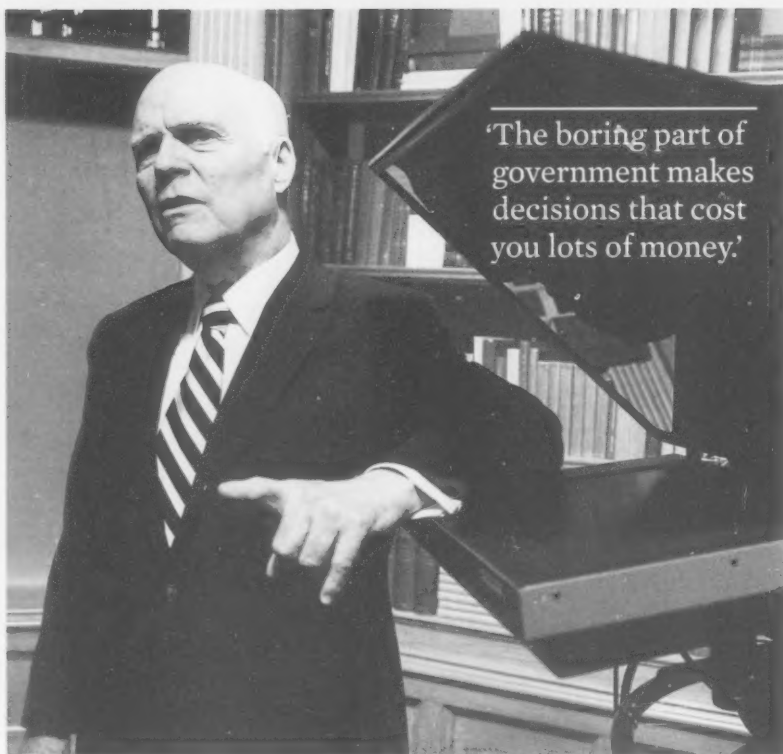
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#### EXIT INTERVIEW

## C-SPAN's maestro exits the stage

*In 1979, Brian Lamb, then the head of Cablevision's DC bureau, achieved what now seems unimaginable: He convinced Congress and cable executives to back his plan to create a nonprofit that would broadcast the proceedings of the House of Representatives, gavel to gavel. It was called C-SPAN, or the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network, and 34 years later, it has grown to include three channels and a radio presence, and has become America's most reliably nonpartisan media outlet. (It also provides reliably good fodder for Saturday Night Live skits.) CJR's Erika Fry spoke to Lamb in early April, just after he stepped down as C-SPAN's CEO; he will continue to serve as executive chairman and to host the program Q&A.*

#### Why stop now?

I had been planning it for a couple of years. Susan Swain and Rob Kennedy, who took over as joint-CEOs, were running the show anyway—it was time for them to have the title that comes with the responsibility and authority. And I just turned 70. I feel very good about the timing.

#### Tell us about the beginning.

I had started talking to people as early as the late '60s and gotten a lot of blank stares. Their reaction was, "We've got three networks, why do we need any more?" The delivery costs of transmitting a signal from New York to Washington to the rest of the country were exorbitant, so no one could get in unless they had a lot of money. When satellite transmission began in the mid-'70s, the costs came down, and people who were interested in creating new programming for television could dream about it.

#### You launched and sustained C-SPAN entirely with funding from the cable industry. How did you manage that?

Bob Rosencrans, the owner of the Madison Square Garden Sports Network, was the first one to say, "I like the idea, and I'll write you the check for \$25,000 to make it happen." The cable industry had so much respect for him, and that, probably more than any other reason, was why we were able to succeed—they trusted *him*, not me.

#### What's C-SPAN's role today?

We haven't changed people's lives so much as the multiplicity of channels has. People don't have to watch anything they watched in the past. People have genuine choice. A lot of people consider what we do to be boring. The only problem with that is that the boring part of your government makes decisions that cost you lots of money. You may not pay attention, but if you ever want to know more, we're there.

#### Who watches C-SPAN?

It has never been a huge audience grabber. C-SPAN appeals to the kind of person who is interested in going in-depth.

#### What do you make of the partisan nature of the current media landscape?

The beauty of cable is that you've got choice all over the place. We're having to relearn as a society how to deal with information. The burden is on us as individuals; it used to be all on the news organizations.


#### In terms of news and information, is there anything left to innovate?

Time. We need more time. And we need more people who are interested in what's available to them. The percentage of people that pay attention is quite small—unfortunately we haven't been able to change that much.

#### You recently started teaching a course on media and politics at your alma mater, Purdue. What do you hope to impart to your students?

The concept of "follow the money." You ought to know who is paying the bills for every media institution you use. Then you can get some sense of why a media institution is doing what it's doing. **CJR**



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